



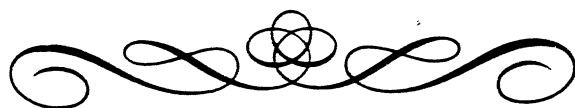


Dark Fantasies 3

(Not for the faint at heart)

**A MULTIMEDIA SLASH ZINE
FEATURING THE FOLLOWING UNIVERSES:**

*Professionals
Blake's Seven
Man from Uncle
Forever Knight*



*Presented
by
Maverick Press
Jo Ann McCoy
2580 I-25 North
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A Special Thanks

to a couple of lovely people:

Betsy M. Mott for her wonderful cover art and
Karen for all her able assistance in editing, layout, and
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Canine Patrol

"The Borzoi Contingent" of Cally and Raider
Babs, the Poodle and Worf, the mutt

Feline Patrol

Squeak who purred on my lap
Roo who watched the printer for me

Dark Fantasies 3

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the third issue of Dark Fantasies. First of all, I would like to thank the contributors who have made this zine possible. It is great to work with such an outstanding group of people.

The cover of Dark Fantasies 3 is special to me because of my growing obsession with Forever Knight. It was wonderful to discover the art of Betsy M. Mott at a con this summer. Betsy does gorgeous work! I would recommend to anyone who is interested in acquiring prints of the cover to SASE her at the following address: Betsy M. Mott, E. 8907 Alki, Spokane, WA 99212. She sells prints of the cover art for \$18 and has another Forever Knight piece of LaCroix, Nick, and Janette for \$20. By the way, she doesn't do just Forever Knight!

In Dark Fantasies 3, we have four stories from Forever Knight. Since Forever Knight is a fandom mainly found on the internet, DF3 does have one story, "Sometime When We Leave", which has had a limited release on the net. It contains consensual S/M elements—Vampire style. Other stories are "Bad Blood" by Ellis Ward, "The Bonding" by tasha, and "Truce" by tasha. Tasha has continued the "Odds Against" and "Metamorphosis" universe in "Truce".

Mary L. Millard has come through again with a marvelous, touching Man From Uncle novella. This story is chock full of angst and *love, especially love*. It is sentimental without being too sweet.

Blake's Seven is represented by four stories. I really would like to thank Irish who submitted right away so that I could get this zine up and going almost before I had DF2 mailed out. She was so enthusiastic that I just couldn't *not* do another Dark Fantasies.

As always, Dark Fantasies ventures into the somber side of Blake's Seven. The novella, "Instruments of Darkness" by Corona Polvanthus, investigates more than the sexuality of Avon and Tarrant; it explores their strength of character. Other submissions include: "Orbital Aberration" by Irish, "Engagement" by Trinity Pawling, and "Rescue" by Catherine.

In Professionals we have two short pieces, but they are worth your time. "Just For Fun" by Catherine and Katharina is a consensual S/M story. Bodie and Doyle are just finding the joys of bondage and domination. Dee has contributed a very short Pros vignette which is heart-wrenching.

With these few hints at the contents, I will leave you to do some exploring of your own. I do hope that you let us know what you thought of the zine.

If you have a story looking for a home, Dark Fantasies 4 is now open for submissions.

Peace and Long Life,

Jo Ann

P.S. When I heard that Dark Fantasies 2 had been nominated for five Stiffie awards, I was thrilled, pleased, and any other adjective that you can think of. Eventually, I heard that "Metamorphosis" and "Blood and Shadows" each had won their categories. *Thanks to you, the readers.*

All correspondence to: Maverick Press, Jo Ann McCoy, 2580 I-25 North, Pueblo, Colorado 81008 or e-mail to tashamccoy@aol.com

Bad Blood

by
Ellis Ward

In a dream he woke. It was dark, yet he could see. Half paralyzed with numbing cold and racked with cramping pangs of hunger, he attempted to sit up. Only after considerable effort did he succeed. One outstretched arm, quivering with weakness, managed to keep him upright. Pain crept into his palm where, fingers splayed wide, it buttressed his weight against smoothly cut stone.

In this dream he cast about for familiarity, but there was none. Not that he failed to recognize the essential character of his surroundings: He was in a crypt, ancient by the look and smell of it. And those who had been laid to rest here were not of his kind; rather they reeked of death and dust. But it was not a place he knew, and he could not remember how he had come to be here.

In this dream.

He shuddered. His head resonated with a dull, persistent ache, the kind which if suffered too long drove men mad. But it was scarcely noticeable compared to the hunger clawing in his belly, so shrilly demanding it had awakened him.

Wincing, he pushed himself off the bier upon which he had been left to lie, landing heavily on the silty earth a few feet below. His legs buckled upon contact, and he collapsed at the base of the polished structure. Huddled against its side, he struggled to remain conscious until a wash of dizziness receded.

Not a dream.

He had been drugged or tampered with—or both. More than that, some time must have passed for his hunger to be so very pronounced—even though his last clear memory was of draining a bottle of his special reserves. Had he taken that meal within the last day or so, his every molecule would not now be agitating for immediate satiation. Easy to imagine, then, that he had been brought here to starve to death.

But it was unlikely. Only one person could have stolen past his defenses and eluded his

preternaturally heightened acuity. And that one person would do nothing that might result in permanent damage to him. Through eight centuries this most hated of creatures had crossed continents and cultures to remain always within reach, to provide unasked for guidance and protection, to ensure that his unwilling apprentice never forgot his origins or the unending reality of his very special hell: *LaCroix*.

Upon that thought a shaft of darkness only a shade less black than the surrounding pitch spilled across the floor from an unseen opening in the opposite side of the crypt, accompanied by a scrape of sound so nearly no sound at all that it might have been imagined—save for the cloaked and hooded form that materialized in its wake.

"Hello, Nicolas." The voice was low and as coarse as gravel.

Stung by despair and a long-standing anger, Nick Knight sighed, "I should've guessed."

"Yes." There was an unpleasant smile in that single word. "How are you?"

Knight slowly but determinedly gained his feet. Leaning back against the bier, he said, "What are you up to?"

"Now why should I be up to anything?" *LaCroix* imperiously lifted the hood away from his face, exposing his broad, unhandsome, and to Knight's mind cruel features. Noiselessly he started down the stone steps that led to the main chamber of the crypt where Knight stood.

"It must have been you who brought me here. Why?"

Seemingly ignoring the question, *LaCroix* remarked, "Hungry, are you, Nick?"

Sudden comprehension made Knight stiffen. "Not that hungry, no." It was a lie; his insides writhed in a special kind of agony.

"No?"

"You can't make me kill," Knight said

sharply.

"Oh, but I can," LaCroix contradicted. "I could at this very moment, if I wanted to." Tilting his head a little to one side, he paused on the bottommost ledge of stone and regarded his creation with something like amusement. "If I were to bring a warm, frightened human to you, here and now, panic racing in their hot, juicy veins, you could *not* refuse—and you know it."

Knight turned away; the image was unbearable.

"Admit it, Nicolas. You are *hungry*."

Stubbornly, Knight said nothing.

"*Very* hungry. With the kind of hunger you've known only once before in your life."

A soft breath exploded from Knight's lungs. "What have you done?"

Impassively, LaCroix met his horrified stare. He was, in Knight's experience, at his most dangerous: deceptively indifferent. "You have forgotten," he murmured with mild rebuke. "Haven't you?" He reached up and with the tip of a forefinger idly traced the rim of his high, black collar, capturing the tab of the zipper beneath his left ear between forefinger and thumb. "You have denied what you are to the point of forgetting even *that*."

"Don't play games with me. What do you want?" Knight growled.

LaCroix's face hardened. "For you to admit what you are. To accept it. To thank *me* for the gift I have given you."

"I know what I am," Knight said flatly. "I *know* what you made me: A monster, just like you. But I will never thank you for that."

"And so—you are here," LaCroix said simply.

Furious, Nick exclaimed, "Do you really think that putting me through one of your petty lectures will make any difference?"

LaCroix glanced down at his other hand, turning it from side to side; what he held there, Nick could not see. "Not a lecture," the older vampire assured him. "That would be a waste of time. Rather, what I have in mind tonight will indeed make all the difference in the world—for you."

The certainty in LaCroix's voice filled Knight with foreboding. The hunger consumed him from within. He *had* felt its like before, but that had been ages ago, beyond remembering. He could not think;

he could not reason. And at this moment, he needed his wits about him to deal with LaCroix—but this terrible hunger precluded rational thought.

"I have let you stray too far for too long," LaCroix remarked sternly. The front of the collar peeled open as he eased the zipper downward. "It's past time you were reminded of what you really are."

"I won't—"

"You have no choice."

Hypnotically the long, pale fingers glided down, down, down, until the upper part of the form-fitting tunic lay open, revealing a long, triangular expanse of porcelain skin from the left side of LaCroix's throat to his right clavicle.

"I tried to kill you before," Knight gasped warningly. "If you think you can make me feed on *you*—"

"You failed." LaCroix shook his head, advancing with measured tread. "You tried and you failed." He spread the supple black leather wider; the skin lying beneath its folds was shockingly white in contrast. "*You* cannot kill me, my Nicolas." His other hand appeared; something glinted like metal in his grasp.

Knight fell back a step, edging alongside the frigid bier, unthinkingly retreating before LaCroix's purposeful approach. "Don't be too sure about that," he argued desperately. "I'm not your *enfant* anymore. One vampire feeding on another—"

LaCroix laughed; the sound of his derision grated in Nick's ears. "I think I can take care of myself, *mon protege*. And, besides, I do not mean to stop at that."

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll learn soon enough."

"Maybe I don't want to learn anything." His back flat against the bier, Knight swallowed with difficulty. "It doesn't matter what *you* want. I won't do it. I won't feed from you again."

"You will," LaCroix countered with devastating confidence. "But don't worry. I will not let you harm me."

The throbbing in Nick's head was killingly painful now, a stupefying counterpoint to the hunger howling deep inside him. He must be able to think clearly, he must overcome this maddening urgency if he were to forestall LaCroix. If he could distract him only long enough to marshal his thoughts—

"You...contaminated one of my bottles."

"Yes. But you still don't understand."

LaCroix made a soft tscking sound. "Not only did I add a little something to make you compliant, I also replaced the contents with *my* blood; the blood of a vampire. Not all of it, just enough to bring you to this state. And you didn't even realize what you had done." Standing only a few feet away, LaCroix brushed his knuckles lightly across his bared chest. A roll of the hand brought into sight a short, sharp blade. Unflinching, he carved a shallow, down-turning arc just below his collarbone, following the angle of the topmost rib.

Fluid welled up from the dark, red line. In lush, glistening rivulets, LaCroix's blood began to run down his broad chest. Before it could wet the lining of his tunic, he positioned his hand to intercept the first hurrying drops. He raised a bloodied finger to his own mouth.

"Stop it," Knight breathed. His eyes were fixed on the small wound. The hunger, violently insistent now and growing stronger, clamored in every nerve ending and brain cell, urging him forward, urging him to bend nearer, urging him to press his lips to—

"No!" Checking himself at the last possible instant, he crashed into the bier behind him, the back of his hand jammed tightly against his treacherous mouth. There was a hint of grudging admiration in LaCroix's regard—but only a hint. Tauntingly, he sucked his fingers clean.

"Don't—"

"Why do you struggle so?" LaCroix protested exasperatedly. "You're trembling, Nick. You know what you want, what you *need*. Stop fighting me."

"No—"

"Hush." LaCroix reached out and cupped his cheek, his thumb briefly skimming across Knight's mouth. Knight tried to pull away, but LaCroix held him, his spread-wide fingers moving round to the back of his head, cradling it in one big palm.

Knight's beclouded gaze dazedly focussed on the creature before him, confusion and abject need contorting his own features. LaCroix's fist closed on a handful of hair. "Follow your instinct." He guided Knight's head down toward the seeping wound.

Seduced by that hoarse instruction, Knight found himself yielding to the instinct to feed. LaCroix's blood filled his senses, the ripe scent of its lush salt-sweetness, its radiant warmth, its smooth, silky texture seizing his brain like tentacles and

reeling him nearer. He opened his mouth. Just before he could submit to his fearful need, he resisted, exerting an unimaginable strength of will. Eyes squeezed shut, jaws clamped tightly together, he pulled away. It was like swimming through treacle.

"Fool," LaCroix said gently. He slowly stroked a finger, wet with his own blood, across Knight's lips.

Knight moaned. His head was reeling. Unaware, he clung to LaCroix for support, that powerful, implacable presence his only reality.

"Lick it off," LaCroix commanded.

"No...."

"Do as I say."

"I *won't*...."

"Nicolas, you are trying my patience." LaCroix was breathing hard. "*Lick if off.*"

The finger slid into Knight's mouth. The taste of fresh blood, vampire's blood, scalded his tongue. Sanity deserted him. The change began.

"Yes," LaCroix hissed. "Much better." Taking Nick's head in both hands, he brought him back to the freely bleeding wound. Intoxicated, no longer entirely rational, Knight sank his teeth into the bare flesh and helplessly began to feed.

LaCroix made a soft, grunting noise. "That's the way." His eyes narrowed to slits.

Oblivious, Knight lost himself in this rare feast. LaCroix's blood was richer and headier than any he had savored for centuries. He *had* forgotten how exhilarating, how impossibly stimulating the blood of another vampire could be. In the furthest reaches of his mind, in a room where all the shades were drawn tight against this dreadful moment, he knew that once the bloodlust was satisfied he would despise himself. And while not so awful a thing as killing to assuage his hunger, when it was over, when he was himself again, he would be faced once more with the knowledge of this contemptible act, and there would be no consolation for having submitted to his old adversary.

But for the moment, he could not prevent his eternal enemy from having his way. LaCroix held him while he fed, one big hand tightly woven in his hair, the other soothingly stroking the back of his neck, his shoulders, the long curve of his spine. That touch, for all that it was overly familiar, was not unwelcome—especially not when a vampire, any vampire, was feeding. Knight floated on it, well

aware that despite his resentment and anger, he was safe here, and in a perverse way cherished. LaCroix would not harm him. LaCroix would not—

"You have made yourself vulnerable, Nicolas," LaCroix whispered huskily. "I would not have attempted such a thing even a hundred years ago. Much less *this*—"

A rustling of fabric muffled the soft sucking sounds Knight made as he fed. He twitched as a cool hand deliberately strayed beneath his clothing. It paused on his hip before starting upward across bare skin. When the hand reached the center of his chest, thumb and forefinger measuring the distance between suddenly taut nipples, Knight tore his mouth away.

"What are—?"

"Shh. Feed."

"I don't want—"

"Hush, my Nicolas. It is *only* pleasure."

A jolt of sheer carnal heat made Knight gasp. His artificially induced hunger was far from satisfied; the wound weeping blood scant inches from his mouth demanded that he resume his attentions. What little control he yet retained was rapidly abandoning him. Knight moaned; his belt and trousers clasp were being opened, the zipper lowered. LaCroix touched him, with a fingertip only. Catching his breath as though in pain, Knight tried to shift away; but LaCroix shoved himself roughly against the length of him, pinning him in place against the bier. Then all at once, LaCroix rose, lifting Knight with him as though he weighed nothing at all.

An instant later Knight found himself on his back atop the stone monument. LaCroix loomed over him, a leg inserted between his upper thighs. Staring down, his eyes as grey and hard as end-of-winter ice, he intoned, "There was a time you might have been able to stop me. Not anymore." His gaze fell to Knight's lips. Then he lowered his head.

Just before their mouths could meet, Knight let out a guttural protest and struggled to roll forward. A powerful forearm crashed into his chest. LaCroix bent forward and kissed him without gentleness, his lips cold and bruising. Before Knight could resist again, the older vampire shifted onto his side, angling himself so that the bloody wound on his chest was well within Knight's reach.

Keening under his breath, Knight snapped at

the torn flesh. LaCroix eased the pressure of his arm, allowing the other vampire to penetrate his skin once more. He held Knight close to him then, encouraging him to deepen the bite, his cheek resting against lightly curling, blond hair.

LaCroix resumed his explorations, and Knight did not object. Of utmost importance was the exquisitely fresh blood flooding his insides. Only peripherally was he aware of the slow caress beneath his shirt, the delicate twist of a nipple, the searching, downward trespass of ribs, abdomen, groin, genitals. The latter, as hungry for contact as he himself was for sustenance, responded at once. The sensations of feeding and of being pleased intertwined until Knight was mindlessly undulating between them, hips rising, chest arching, conscious thought no longer a major factor in the pursuit of completion—

—until LaCroix unceremoniously nudged Knight's legs farther apart and lowered himself between them.

Stunned, Knight began to withdraw his fangs.

LaCroix stilled him, a hand held firmly behind his head. His voice a harsh rumble, he said persuasively, "Don't worry, Nicolas. There will be another time for *that*. Something fairly basic will suffice for now, I think."

LaCroix's erection pressed into Knight's belly, fully aroused and pulsing alongside Knight's unwilling hardness. In this too it seemed he could not resist. He deepened his bite as LaCroix began to move, Knight's reluctant ardor growing with each slow, powerful thrust.

For the first time in decades Knight truly knew what it meant to be a vampire. His every sense was alive with a special awareness. Sensation was all he knew, and it seemed as though he knew it all: the voluptuous taste and texture of LaCroix's blood nourishing him, restoring him, igniting within him a soaring, sensual elation; the weight and strength of the other vampire's body bearing down upon him with raw, ungoverned passion; his own lust, like a mushrooming burst of white heat, searing every nerve cell in his body.

At that moment, Knight forgot every promise of a return to mortality he had ever made to himself. There was only *now*, and now consisted only of his need and its imminent gratification. The tiny part of his mind that retained total comprehension looked on

in silent dismay, no longer even allowed to voice its misgivings.

LaCroix reared up and back, abruptly and painfully ending Knight's feeding. Knight snarled his displeasure, grabbing the older vampire's arms and attempting to drag him back down. But the change had begun in LaCroix as well. His face savage, his terrible eyes aglow, his mouth ugly with exposed fangs, he forced Knight to lie flat beneath him and to turn his head for his convenience. Without ceremony he took Knight's throat, sinking honed teeth into yielding flesh. Violently, he started to feed.

For an instant, no longer, Knight attempted to regain the upper hand. Had he been thinking, he would have realized that LaCroix could not deny his true nature in such a highly charged situation. But only now that his own bloodlust had subsided somewhat was his head clear enough to accept what was happening. In any case, there was yet another lust to be satisfied, and being the prey of a hungry vampire could be every bit as stimulating as being the predator. LaCroix's mouth was cool and wet upon his skin, his bite excruciating but somehow excitingly so, and the rhythmic suction of his ravenous feeding matched the ruthless cadence of his thrusts. Surrendering with a low groan, Knight felt his insides melt together and turn to liquid fire. His entire being seemed to surge upward, boiling toward release. He cried out as orgasm overtook him. And then he shattered into a million shards of agonized, uncontrollable rapture.

Shortly afterward, LaCroix collapsed upon him. His psychic presence burned into Knight's consciousness; the link he had forged at the sacrifice of Knight's mortality so many hundreds of years ago was completely intact once more. Moments passed, the rasp of their breathing the only noise in the dark chamber. Then LaCroix removed his fangs from Knight's throat. Nuzzling with lips and tongue, growling silkily deep in his throat, he washed the tiny wounds clean. Slowly, he pushed himself off the supine form, his hands following the curves and angles of Knight's body until he bent nearly double over his tender groin. Conscientiously, he removed all traces of their lovemaking, thoughtfully tidying Knight's clothing when he had finished. Devastated by the intensity of the experience, Knight did nothing to stop him. After seeing to his own apparel as well, LaCroix vaulted off the bier.

Regarding Knight with amused disdain, LaCroix observed, "You must see now how weak you have become. Because you would be human again."

Refusing to be provoked, Knight only shook his head. "I will be free of you some day."

"Impossible. You are what you are, Nicolas."

Gingerly sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge of the stone, Knight turned bitter eyes on the creature that had stolen his humanity. No longer in thrall to the madness, there was no escaping the horror of what he had done. Worse, Knight realized that LaCroix, in his way, really cared about him. Sick with self-loathing, he said, "Go away."

"Whether I go or stay will make no difference. We are bound together you and I. Forever."

"No. Not if I die trying."

"Easy," LaCroix said with irony, "for an immortal to say." He raised the hood off his shoulders and pulled it onto his head, hiding his face beneath ebony folds. And then he turned on heel and strode up the steps.

Knight waited until LaCroix had left the chamber, the whisper of stone brushing against stone signalling that he had gone at last. Wincing, he laid two fingers against the small puncture wounds in his neck. They were tender and pulsed uncomfortably with each weary beat of his heart.

He felt unclean.

Letting his head fall forward, he sat there alone for a long time. An almost inaudible, almost indescribable sound eventually drew his attention downward. There in the silty earth below his feet was a tiny crater, round and dark. As he watched, his vision clouding, a puff of silt heralded the appearance of a second crater formed exactly like the first, followed by a third, and then a fourth. Belatedly, he understood: Knight closed his eyes and continued to weep, the soft ground at his feet pocked with his tears.

* * *

"Ah, Nick, don't." A finger brushed against his cheek, startling him awake. He reached out blindly and captured a thin wrist in a brutal grip. "Ow!"

"Natalie—?" Cautiously he glanced around.

He was in *his* bed, in *his* bedroom. The force's forensic pathologist Natalie Lambert sat in a hard-backed chair at his side. Her face was pale and purplish shadows underscored tired eyes.

"You're going to break that," she said through clenched teeth.

He let out a sharp breath and released her. "Sorry."

"Boy, when you recover, you recover." She gave her wrist an experimental roll. "You've been ill," she informed him matter of factly. "Schanke came looking for you night before last when you didn't show up at work. He found you on the floor of your kitchen, completely unconscious. I came over as soon as he called."

"Night before last?"

"Yes. Do you remember anything?"

Knight's hand rose involuntarily to cover his throat. He frowned.

"There was a nearly empty bottle of blood on the floor," Natalie went on. "I had it tested. It was contaminated with pesticides, according to preliminary tox results."

"Pesticides?" Wonderingly he rubbed the smooth, unbroken skin under his fingertips. "Then I didn't—?"

"No." Natalie yawned, almost forgetting to cover her mouth with a hand. "None of that really hap—" She flattened her fingers against her lips as she realized what she was betraying.

Flushed, Knight said, "I talk in my sleep?"

Natalie slumped back in her chair. "Sometimes." Apologetically, she explained, "And sometimes—don't ask me how—I could actually see what *you* were seeing."

Knight sighed. "I must have been out of control."

"You were very sick. The chemicals must have acted like an hallucinogen—which translated into a really rotten nightmare for you."

He stared at her.

Flustered, Natalie muttered, "I mean, not even LaCroix would do that to you."

Knight let his eyes fall shut. "No."

"Oh, Nick, I'm sorry. I would have left you alone, but I was worried. You had such a nasty reaction."

Gathering the last of his reserves, Knight reached out for Natalie's hand. She allowed him to take it. "I'm the one who ought to apologize. You

shouldn't have had to see that."

With wry affection she said, "I am a doctor. Believe it or not, I've seen worse."

"I wouldn't have thought that possible."

"It was just a nightmare, Nick. And now it's almost dawn. Are you feeling strong enough to get up and eat something?"

"Dawn? I've lost almost two days?"

"You were practically comatose all of the night before last and the better part of yesterday. You finally started to shake it off about an hour ago."

Despite his embarrassment and chagrin, Knight became aware of a profound relief. *Only a dream!* "Yeah," he confessed. "I'm starved."

"C'mon, then. Let's get you something to eat."

Under Natalie's supervision, Knight downed a bottle of fresh blood which had been tested for, and found free of, pollutants. He was exhausted despite having slept for almost thirty-six hours; it distressed him, and he said so.

"Not the same as sleep," Natalie corrected. "Your body was working hard trying to heal itself. Are you okay now?"

Basking in her kindly gaze, Knight wondered not for the first time how he had gotten so lucky to have met her. "Yeah. You must be almost out on your feet, Nat. Go home. I'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

He stood, holding onto the chair back until he felt his strength return. "Soon as you leave, I'll go back to bed."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

After sending Natalie gratefully on her way, Knight spent a long half hour in the bathroom freshening up. Showered, his hair clean, his body scrubbed raw in a vain attempt to remove phantom impurities, he returned to his bed. With every minute he remained awake, the nightmare faded further into obscurity. But he could scarcely keep his eyes open, and his entire body ached as though it had been pummelled from crown to heel.

At last he lay on his back, hands folded across his waist, utterly boneless and contentedly warm. He was drifting on the outskirts of slumber when a tingling awareness brought his eyes open and his head up.

LaCroix.

He stood at the foot of Knight's bed, looking just as he had in his dream, hooded and powerful, a dark force not to be denied.

"What do you want?" The bedclothes pooled unnoticed in a heap around Knight's hips as he drew himself tensely upright.

"You've been unwell."

"I'm fine."

LaCroix slowly removed his hood. "Come now, Nicolas. You look like hell. What happened?"

Knight forced himself to relax. *It had been a dream. Nothing had changed.* "Something I ate didn't agree with me."

Waggling a finger, LaCroix gently scolded, "Let that be a lesson to you: You need to improve your eating habits."

Knight almost laughed. "I'll try to be more careful," he promised sardonically.

Abandoning the foot of the bed, LaCroix wandered about the room, idly examining this and that. Casting a sidelong glance Knight's way, he said lightly, "You were broadcasting rather indiscriminately while you were ill."

Chagrined, Knight remarked, "If you intercepted any of that, you must have been awfully nearby."

LaCroix gave him a surprised look. "Always."

Knight's chin came up. "It was a nightmare."

"A very *detailed* nightmare."

"A nightmare nonetheless." Knight glared at him. "You didn't have anything to do with that contaminated blood I somehow got hold of—?"

"I? Of course not. I wasn't even aware that pesticides could affect our kind that way. Something to remember."

"Yes." Knight's scowl deepened. "And if you overheard all of that, why did you ask in the first place?"

LaCroix studied him silently a long moment. "I worry about you."

"You don't need to," he retorted emphatically.

"Oh, but I do." LaCroix wheeled around and retraced his steps, pausing once more at the foot of Knight's bed. "Get some rest, Nicolas." His lips twitched into a tiny grin. "Perhaps—" the grin widened—"I'll see you in your dreams."

Knight swallowed, his throat as dry as dust.

"Unlikely. *I'm* not your type."

Brows raised, LaCroix countered, "I wouldn't have thought that *I* was *yours*."

"You aren't," Knight said evenly. His heart had begun to race. "It was a *nightmare*, remember?"

"Hmm. Still—"

Knight held his breath.

"Still," LaCroix decided amiably, "it's something to think about." He favored the younger vampire with the full power of his compelling gaze. "Isn't it?" He covered his head with the hood, his smile, like that of the Cheshire Cat, the last part of his face to be seen. "Good night, Nicolas. Sleep well." An instant later he was gone, vanishing soundlessly into the night.

Slowly, slowly, Knight sank back into his bedclothes. *Nothing had changed.* He must, as always, be on his guard where LaCroix was concerned. But he could take care of himself. He had managed to do that for a very long time.

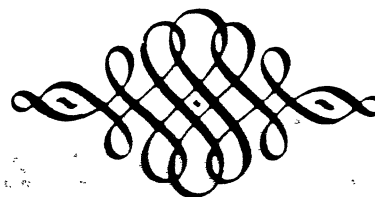
Nothing had changed.

As Knight drifted into a troubled sleep, his mind moored itself to a single image: LaCroix, speculatively murmuring, "*Still, it's something to think about.*"

"Isn't it?"

THE END

For tasha
December 1994



The Bonding

by
tasha

Janette looked back at the unconscious figure resting on the bier; his long wavy blond hair was matted with sweat. Beside her once pure knight, running his fingers over the now healed throat, was LaCroix.

"Lucien, must you do this?" she enquired, pausing at the door of the underground passage.

Leaving Nicolas de Brabant in his unconscious state behind, LaCroix walked over to Janette, "You know I must. He has to be tightly bonded to me. I've lost others; I won't lose this one." LaCroix paused and turned his gaze back to the figure resting quietly where he had left him. "You can stay, my dear." The full lips pulled back in a slight sneer at her obvious discomfort. She was so tender of heart that at times he wasn't sure this could be a child of his.

"No, no, I'll find something to amuse myself." She fled into the night. She had survived her own light bonding and that was enough. She knew that unbonded fledglings were a menace to whole community. She felt sorry for Nicolas, but at the same time was glad that LaCroix had never seemed to have the obsession with her that he had with Nicolas. She took to the air once she was out of the trees, fleeing the whole situation. She would find a quiet village to raid and return to their small cottage in the woods for the day. She would avoid the villa and caverns where LaCroix would work his magic on Nicolas.

After Janette left, LaCroix walked back to the raised coffin-like structure and looked at the quiet figure resting there. Possessively, he ran his hand down over the fair hair then to the clean-cut features. It had been nearly a millenia since he had had these

feelings about any person or thing.

Smiling slightly, he reached down, picked up the young knight in his arms, and carried him as a father would his injured child. Through the torch-lit passageway and around a corner, he entered a room he had prepared for this. In the back corner was a straw pallet and on this he gently lay his burden. Kneeling in the dust covering the floor, he ran his long sensitive fingers over the features once more. Janette didn't understand how critical it was for Nicolas to be completely bonded to him before the Council met again. He had lost Gaius to the Council centuries ago; he wouldn't lose this one. He retreated from the cell and pulled the heavy iron bars closed and locked the chains. Then he shut the massive wooden door which had a small grated window.

This night the moon was full so the prey should be easy to find and plentiful. LaCroix rose into the night sky and glided gently on the mild summer breezes. Watching the forest carefully, he soon found what he was seeking. It was a small camp fire hidden among the towering trees, sheltering only one man. Dropping silently down, he watched the sleeping man rolled in his sheepskin coverings. It was too easy, but since he needed more than one kill this evening.... Usually he liked to give his victims "a sporting chance." This one would not be killed on the wing, so-to-speak, but on the ground. Throwing his glamour over the area, he leaped on the sleeping peasant. Quickly and efficiently, he dispatched the man. He savored the tart, musk-flavored blood and smiled to himself. He had spared this rogue a very painful death for hunting the Lord of the Manor's deer.

Rising quickly from his kill, he made no effort to cover his crime. The Baron ruling the area wouldn't hunt very hard for the murderer of a poacher. It would be in his best interests to allow the peasants to believe that the forest was haunted. Yes, it was haunted for the moment by Lucien LaCroix.

Smiling thinly at the superstition of the age which normally worked in his favor, he hunted again for a lone peasant. It didn't take him long to find one at the edge of the forest, surreptitiously chopping wood in the dim moonlight. Again the overlord wouldn't mourn this one much. He fed copiously on these miscreants, knowing full well that neither of the crimes deserved a death sentence. Humans were simply cattle to his species, but he normally avoided killing for the sake of killing. However he had to feed heavily for the next few nights if he was to make the link between himself and Nicolas strong and unbreakable.

He returned to the caverns shortly before dawn. He checked on his young knight and found he was still resting. Yes, he would wake in a few hours when the sun set on his second night as a vampire. His first night he had fed on human blood. This was necessary for the change to be complete. Soon he would feed differently and would continue to feed in this manner until the bond was completed.

Leaving his charge to continue to sleep off his last feeding, LaCroix went back to his living quarters. In these vaults under a seemingly ruined, ancient Roman villa, LaCroix felt much at home. Neither Janette nor Nicolas knew of the amenities he had restored. Closing the outer door that led into the primitive caverns, he went immediately to the bath heated by the redone hypocaust. He held two human slaves in mental thrall to keep the furnace fed so that the few rooms left of the villa and this area had heat and hot water. He could never get used to the filth of this era. Bathing had been a daily ritual when he had been human, and he continued the custom as often as circumstances would allow. He had trained Janette to change her habits as he would his new minion. Relaxing in the bath, he soaked off the blood and dirt of his meal.

After finishing his toilette off with a close, unfashionable shave, he went into the bedroom and searched through the few books he had managed to salvage and read a few lines before dropping off to rest in the vampire way. The former Roman general slept while the sun made its way across the sky. As the sky dimmed, LaCroix rose from his couch and dressed in the customary tunic and chauses. Slipping on the crude slipper-like shoes, he left the comfort of the villa section of his underground warren.

Once in the passages, he relit the torches his slaves had snuffed at sunrise when they had finished their duties. Carrying one torch, he entered the isolated passageway and walked toward the locked room. Looking through the grating, he quietly watched his charge pace the narrow room. Nicolas occasionally kicked at the straw pallet in frustration. Yes, the former knight would require another full night and day before he was ready for the bonding procedure to begin.

Leaving before he was noticed, LaCroix went back down the passageway and out into the moonlit night. Once more his kills were easy and took only part of the evening. Sketchily washing himself in a stream, he went to the secluded cottage that he normally occupied with Janette. She was also

returning from the ridiculously easy kills in this area.

Before he had completely settled to the ground, she questioned him, "Have you begun it, yet?"

"No, he isn't quite ready."

"Why must you do this thing?"

"He must be marked as mine and you know it!"

"Why must you be so possessive of this one? He's no different than many others of his class."

"One day you will know this feeling. Until that time, you have no right to question me," LaCroix answered in disgust. "Is there anything that you need? I can have Marie bring something around during the day."

"No, I am going to Rheims and stay with Phillippe. He has always wanted me to spend some time with him." Phillippe was a handsome vampire who had always interested Janette; now was an opportune moment for her to indulge herself. LaCroix was busy with his new toy and it was time for her to spread her wings a bit.

Nodding his approval of her independence, LaCroix cautioned, "Watch yourself. Phillippe may think he has everything under control, but I don't like this new trick of the Christian church, the Inquisition, as they call themselves. The power of the church is beginning to fail for many reasons, and they are trying to reestablish full control over people's lives. Just don't get caught by these petty priests."

"Phillippe has paid off every churchman within a hundred miles of his estate."

"It is not always instigated by the local parish priest, but by someone sent out from Rome."

"I will be careful."

"Do so. I will mourn you if you should get yourself burned at the stake for heresy especially through carelessness." The elder vampire stalked off into the surrounding forest before taking to the air.

Janette turned back toward the cottage to continue her meager packing. She was mainly taking her jewelry and some gold to barter for a new wardrobe. She needed some things and a more active social life. Phillippe could supply that for now. She would return to Nicolas and LaCroix after the bonding was finished. If it was done properly, Nicolas would have little memory of it. She didn't remember her own at all. The process would simply fix his loyalty for all time to LaCroix as her own was. LaCroix had speculated as he was teaching her the procedure that she had been in such a desperate situation as mortal

that she was more than willing to do anything to leave her life behind. She didn't think the young knight was that serious. She had a feeling he had done it for a lark... the adventure of the unknown. Now he was going to learn exactly what his escapade was going to cost him. She almost felt regret for her part in his seduction but only slightly. If he was foolish enough to believe LaCroix, then he got exactly what he deserved.

Leaving the cottage and forest behind, LaCroix was satisfied that she would be occupied for some time and returned to the wrecked villa. Once again he read, bathed, and rested for the upcoming battle of wills between him and the newly fledged vampire, who by this time must be frantic with his seeming desertion and feeling nearly starved. LaCroix smiled thinly, remembering his purpose. He would enjoy it, but Nicolas might hate him for all time if there was any difficulty. It was simply a necessity for young vampires, especially ones that were turned by a vampire the Council hated and feared as much as they hated and feared LaCroix. He was simply too old and powerful not to worry the Council members now. And they knew he had a grudge against their rule. Although he had never tried to usurp their authority, some members were continually suspicious of him. He had not indulged in politics as a human, and never intended to in his changed life. However, many of the Council couldn't understand his lack of ambition.

As the sun set, LaCroix once again made his way through the passages as he had the night before. When outside the locked room, he again observed his new responsibility. The young vampire didn't notice he was being watched. He was reaching the desperation stage of his development. His face was flushed with exertion and his eyes were in transition. The sharp young fangs were fully distended. Yes, this was the moment to begin. He had been too soft-hearted to put the young Gaius through this, and it had cost him his handsome lover. He would not lose this one because of a tender heart. This one also had strengths that Gaius lacked. Not that Gaius had been a weak person; he just wasn't as strong as this young fledgling. Gaius had been desperate the first night after his turning... Nicolas had taken two days and two long nights.

Opening the double door arrangement warned his charge of his arrival. Once the door swung open, Nicolas attacked. He would have attacked anything in his desperation to feed. With a quick, brutal movement LaCroix threw his charge back toward the

pallet, slamming him into the wall. Here was the moment of truth... LaCroix had to be more powerful than his child or Nicolas would escape into the night. He would hunt the forest with no caution and would probably eventually be killed by frightened humans. If that didn't happen, the Enforcement members of the Council would relish making his end very painful, considering LaCroix was his sponsor.

There was a whoosh of displaced air, as LaCroix landed on the stunned young vampire. Ripping open his tunic, LaCroix grabbed the dirty blond head and thrust it toward his chest. He winced as Nicolas' fangs sank deep into the heavy muscle above his left breast. Nicolas shook his head and the fangs sank deeper into the other vampire's thick musculature. Restraining Nicolas' head with both of his hands, he threw back his own head and enjoyed the sensation of the other's taking. There was some pain for the elder vampire, but the rush of blood from his system was a delight. As the euphoria filtered into his mind, he felt Nicolas' strength returning. Grasping the other's shoulders, he ripped the young knight free of his chest.

Without releasing his hold on the other's body, he managed to flip Nicolas over to his stomach. Nicolas grunted in his struggle to be free and feed at his leisure. The older vampire sprawled over the other's prone body, hampering the increasingly desperate struggles. Nicolas' sanity was returning, and he began to grapple in earnest. It was beginning to be clear to him exactly what was going to happen if he couldn't release himself from LaCroix. There was no pleading from the former knight. LaCroix was pleased with that aspect of his victim. Here was a strong personality that he could admire. It might be pleasant to stop and seduce his prey instead of forcing him. It had worked with Gaius, but ultimately it had cost them both more than LaCroix was willing to pay again.

LaCroix stopped his ruminating and released his control of the vampire beast within himself then sank his fangs into the carotid artery on the side of Nicolas' neck. His own fangs produced an element to initiate the same ecstasy LaCroix had experienced earlier with the side benefit of nearly paralyzing the victim. This component wouldn't be available in Nicolas' fangs for some days yet. This was why the bonding had to take place almost immediately after the fledgling crossed over. It wouldn't do for the master to be accidentally paralyzed by his child.

The heady experience of vanquishing this beautiful young man manifested itself in a sexual urge

which LaCroix gave into whole-heartedly. He sank his fangs deeper into the artery and drank passionately of the sweet blood while his sex thickened from the oversupply of blood. Fumbling a little, he finally opened his chauses and shoved up the scanty tunic that Nicolas wore.

He rubbed his engorged penis over the quivering hips. Nicolas might be nearly immobile, but he was aware of the events taking place. Pulling his head back a little, releasing his canines, LaCroix took his left hand and turned the blond head to savor the exquisite profile. With the crippling agent being quickly dissipated in his blood stream, Nicolas yanked his head free and tried to dislodge his attacker again. It was an exercise in futility, but he continued to try. LaCroix approved of the renewed fight shown by his protege. He almost gave in to the gallant efforts of Nicolas. No, it would never do to leave him vulnerable to the danger inherent in freedom at this stage.

Once more LaCroix lowered his head and sank his dripping fangs into a new spot on the artery. Then he reached between their bodies and guided his penis into the unprotected young body. He lunged hard and deep, impaling Nicolas on his excited organ. Then he stilled his thrusts to allow his charge to accommodate himself to the penetration. Even though any damage done would heal during the day, LaCroix did not try to be deliberately cruel. Cruelty was part of the vampire nature if it was allowed to override the gentler urges. LaCroix was rarely cruel without reason. This time there was a certain brutality that must be part of the procedure, but undue pain wasn't necessary. He caressed the shoulders of the body beneath him. He felt the shudder that passed through the young man as his hands passed over the taut muscles.

Finally his natural urge to mate overcame his scruples. He drove his cock hard and fast into the unwilling body. He pulled his fangs out of the artery in the neck and licked the sluggishly bleeding wounds. Once more he turned the young man's head to the side and leaned down to lick the heavy vein pulsing under the Nicolas' jaw. Nicolas tried to struggle, but only managed to quiver under the new assault.

"Quiet, my pet," LaCroix murmured as he once more inserted his fangs into Nicolas' flesh. This time he pulled Nicolas' head back and stretched to reach the jugular vein. There was a whole different ambiance with drinking from this vein as opposed to sipping from the large artery. With the paralyzing agent once more holding the young vampire steady, LaCroix

began once more to pump his sex into the unwilling body. Finally he shoved one last time and stiffened in orgasm. As he reached the summit of his lust, he broke open the barriers in his quarry's mind. Using the strength of his orgasm he was able to overwhelm the defenses of the young vampire's mind. He was completely taken aback at what he found within the young knight that had chosen to be changed over into a vampire. Here was a person who believed strongly in the values in which he had been indoctrinated by the Baron who had fostered him. His choice of changing into a vampire had been a whim and a lark. He didn't understand that there was no returning to the pure knight he had once been. LaCroix paused in his dominance of the essence of Nicolas de Brabant, but he couldn't turn back now anymore than Nicolas could return to his human form.

Slumping over Nicolas' back covered in a rough homespun cloth, LaCroix panted and gloried in his conquest. Yes, owning this being was going to be very satisfying. Done correctly his mental influence would keep all those troublesome scruples at bay for centuries.

"You bastard...you bastard...," Nicolas repeated over and over again.

LaCroix gentled the bowed head and lifted himself off the young man. Once more he reached for the tousled head then mentally winced as Nicolas flinched away from him with fear flaring in the deep blue eyes. Stifling his own instinct to apologize, he grasped the now very susceptible young vampire and pulled the head toward his unmarked breast.

Natural urges overtook Nicolas and he fed once more from his maker. LaCroix enjoyed the feeling of feeding his minion. Yes, it would take a while to make this one what he wanted, but it would be worth it.

He cuddled the young vampire to him as Nicolas finished his meal naturally this time. Using the pathway opened in the sexual liaison, he quieted the raging mind and sent Nicolas into unconsciousness. He rose and looked down at the figure on the pallet then reached down and pulled his chauses back into place and laced them up with the leather thongs.

LaCroix squatted once more in the dirt and pushed the filthy hair back from the classically handsome features of his new amusement. Gathering the luscious body to him, he rose and exited the small cell. He carried Nicolas to his private quarters where he bathed him in the always warm pool of his bath. He scrubbed out the tangled mane of golden hair and

gently parted the forming mats. As he worked in contentment, Nicolas woke and deep blue eyes watched his every move.

"Why did you do this to me?" Nicolas questioned as LaCroix helped him from the bath and dried him with snowy linen towels.

"It is necessary," he answered roughly. "Come."

"This unnatural relationship was not part of my bargain," Nicolas said as LaCroix led his nude charge into the sleeping quarters. He didn't remember the mental attack only the sexual assault.

"You didn't question too closely everything involved in the bargain you made. Now you will have to live with the consequences." There was a fire that lit behind the blue eyes that said Nicolas would fight him every step of the way. So be it, thought LaCroix... anything worth having was always difficult.

LaCroix felt the sun rising, so he pushed Nicolas down on the linen covered couch without a further answer. There was no more he could say that would appease Nicolas. Then he slipped out of his own damp clothing and slid down beside the young vampire.

"Just know that it must be," he finally said as Nicolas began dropping off to sleep away the day. He would have to age a few more weeks before he could choose to be active during the day. That fact made the bonding much easier. He would not have to be restrained during that time and LaCroix could relax his vigilance. At this point LaCroix thought he had enough of a mental link that he could possibly find his young fledgling if Nicolas took it into his head to escape. However, the tie would be stronger in time and then his child could be allowed a measure of freedom without much danger of being lost.

He dropped his own closely cropped brown head to rest on the shoulder of Nicolas. He allowed himself the luxury of a few hours of vampire sleep. He was troubled by visions of Gaius. Ordinarily he didn't indulge himself in regrets or bad memories; however, this day he was negligent in disciplining his mind....

Once more he was in the huge cavern where the Enforcement Committee conducted its business. There was no regular schedule of these meetings. Word was simply sent to the vampire population in general and most attended. Not to attend was dangerous.

Lucius and Gaius walked toward the table assigned them. Both seated themselves and watched the proceedings. Gaius had never been summoned before, and he was fascinated by the various races represented. Lucius watched tolerantly of the enthusiasm in his new young lover. He would have done anything to make him happy. He was a gorgeous young Roman Centurion. His closely cropped dark hair curled around the edges of his hairline. His body showed the benefits of the fitness required of the Empire's soldiers. His eyes were a startling blue under heavy dark lashes; an alabaster complexion completed the picture. Lucius basked in the envy of the other members of the Council. The regular business was quickly dispatched. There was a short break for conversation and relaxation. Lucius had few if any friends on the Council. At this meeting he had eyes only for his latest convert.

"Lucius, this is as impressive as the Senate," the young vampire confided to his older maker.

"Have you ever seen the Senate at work?" Lucius questioned.

"I had guard duty there once. The orations were so inspiring."

Lucius smiled in his cynical manner. His young pup was so refreshing after all the dissipated youth of the Emperor's court. He was terribly pleased that he had found this young man dying on the field of battle after a skirmish with barbarians in Britain. He had immediately seen his value and changed him.

"Lucius, will you approach the tribunal?" The deep voice of the court recorder startled him from his brief reverie of a few years ago.

Rising, Lucius walked toward the chairman of the Committee. "Yes, what is your pleasure, sirs?" he addressed the entire Committee, not without a certain amount of sarcasm in his tone.

"You, Lucius, are charged with bringing over a new fledgling without proper precautions and without bonding him to you for the requisite time."

"Gaius is a very responsible person, sirs," Lucius found himself blurting out like a peasant.

"As a citizen of the community, you should know that the proper bonding of a fledgling is one of our most important laws," the Chairman paused, with a simpering grin that enraged Lucius. "You will turn your unlawful minion over to the tribunal at this time."

Lucius leapt to his feet enraged by the decree only find himself facing three large Enforcement types bandishing large stakes with knowing smiles behind their displayed fangs. Three other Enforcers were

dragging a stunned Gaius from the room.

LaCroix regained control of his wandering subconscious as Nicolas shifted in uneasy rest. The former Roman general pulled away from his recent change-child and rose. There would be no more sleep for him this day so he retrieved the book he had been perusing the previous day. He waited restlessly for the day to near its end. As he felt the sun nearing the horizon, he went to Nicolas and examined the wounds on his neck, then turning him, he examined the more intimate area that might have been damaged. Everything was pink and healthy once more. The vampire physiology had completely healed him during the day, as it should.

He lifted Nicolas from his couch and took him back to his cell. LaCroix had to hunt again this night. Feeding for two was a burden, but he thought the results would be worth it.

Again by the light of the now waning moon, he found more poachers and made quick kills. He drained all their blood to replenish what he had expended with Nicolas the previous night.

Back in the caverns, he once more found Nicolas up and pacing his small room. Entering cautiously, he was prepared for the attack when it came. This time Nicolas was stronger, but the older vampire still had the strength to overpower his protege. As Nicolas sank his fangs into LaCroix's breast, the elder vampire smiled as he noticed it was easier than the last time to force Nicolas to take his nourishment from him.

Before Nicolas was satisfied, he forced him again onto his stomach and repeated the previous night's rape of both Nicolas' mind and body. It was becoming more addictive each time he did it. He basked in the aftermath as Nicolas fed and alternately swore at him.

Again he bathed his charge and put him to bed on his own couch. Nicolas couldn't know, but no one had slept there but LaCroix... not even Janette.

By the beginning of the fifth night, Nicolas no longer attacked LaCroix with the intention of escaping, only to gain sustenance. He submitted more willingly to the rapes each time. The bonding was becoming firmly enforced within the young one's mind. LaCroix was pleased with his progress. A few more days and he wouldn't even have to lock the doors of the cell while he found victims for his bloodlust. All was proceeding as it should.

On the seventh night as he was returning from his kills, he was surprised to find Janette waiting for him in the outer room.

"Lucien, the Council has called a meeting in Paris in two days. Phillippe says you cannot avoid this one. He fears you will be charged with something."

"Merde! Couldn't they give me a few more days? He's nearly ready. I'm not sure I can pull it off this soon." LaCroix paced the room. He would have to hurry the process. By rushing things, he took the chance of ruining everything. But he had to keep this lovely young thing alive.

Showing Janette into his private quarters, he began preparing for his last assault on Nicolas' mind and body. Janette exclaimed over the rooms and immediately headed for the bathing room. She was delighted with the restored villa. Leaving her to her own devices, LaCroix paced his own quarters and speculated on how far he could push the bonding process. He thought he needed at least two more weeks to get to the stage where Nicolas might pass the inspection of the Council.

Leaving his rooms he walked slowly and, with little enthusiasm, traversed the long passageway. Using his own vast overpowering vitality from the double kills, he entered the cell and feigned off the attack of the strengthening young vampire. He threw Nicolas into a corner of his cell where he fell heavily against the stone walls. The younger vampire rose shakily to his feet and a puzzled look came into the beloved deep blue eyes of the knight. It was obvious that he hadn't been expecting to be brutalized again. LaCroix forced himself to ignore the gaze as he shoved his protege to his knees.

"There is another way for you get what you need," he growled at the kneeling figure. Then he fumbled with his chauses with numb fingers. This was too soon. Nicolas wasn't far enough ensorcelled. But he only had this evening to reinforce his will over Nicolas or the consequences didn't bear speculating on.

Nicolas shook his head in refusal.

"You can't refuse," LaCroix snarled, reaching for the gleaming head. By torchlight the former knight's hair seemed to be burnished gold. LaCroix would never forget as the proud head bowed under the weight of the mental command and his own heavy hands. Nicolas opened his mouth and took in LaCroix's hardening member. His licking and sucking was the most powerful aphrodisiac that the elder vampire had ever experienced. He sank to the floor and pulled Nicolas down with him. He reclined on his

back as Nicolas leaned over him to manipulate the fast engorging penis. Rising up on his elbows then finally to a sitting position, LaCroix savored the sensations. Eventually he leaned over and gently pierced the neck which was flexing in its efforts to bring LaCroix to a devastating orgasm. Once his teeth were engaged, there was no staving off the contractions that shook the elder vampire's body.

After Nicolas had drained his cock of all of its emission, LaCroix pulled the slender body to his breast. Nicolas sank his fangs deeply into the heavy muscle and finally sated his need.

Knowing that the final rape was going to be more distressing than anything that had preceded it, LaCroix gently turned his charge around and looked into the painfilled eyes. He hugged the compliant body to his for long moments; but he knew the longer he put it off, the harder it would be to force himself to complete the bond.

He pushed Nicolas around on the dirty floor. He grimaced at the surroundings; he had always envisioned the final taking on his own pristine couch in the luxurious surroundings of the restored villa. Now it was to be in this grubby cell with no amenities to ease the trauma.

Stifling his more tender scruples, he rose and pulled his charge with him. He propelled Nicolas across the floor where he could, at least, be cushioned by the thin straw pallet. Without further ado, he spread himself over the compliant body prone on the pad. With distaste he extended his fangs as carefully as he could into the bowed neck. Nicolas didn't struggle, but neither did he revel in it as he should if there had been time to prepare him. LaCroix rubbed his semi-erect member up and down the acquiescent body beneath him. Eventually he achieved his erection and could insert it into the quivering body. It wasn't his cock that was going to induce exquisite pain, but perhaps it could be enough of a distraction for the next step in the mental ties. Thrusting in mindlessly, he pumped joylessly into the unwilling body. Then as orgasm was imminent, he forced his mind into the other's thoughts and overshadowed them completely. He pushed the struggling sense of self deeply into the recesses of Nicolas' brain. He ground his own will throughout the intellect. Nicolas would be completely aware of the control being exerted by his master, but would be helpless to do anything about it now. Finally it was done and LaCroix withdrew as carefully as he could. Somewhere on the far edges of his consciousness, he had been aware that Nicolas had

begun screaming as he raped the defenseless mind. He couldn't have stopped the assault even if he had desired to. Now he held the hysterically weeping body to him.

He cursed the fates that called a Council session at this time. If he'd have had the time Nicolas would have been his and completely unaware of how it was done.

The bloody tears stained his light colored tunic, but he didn't care. This binding would fool the Council, but it wouldn't be retained. He lamented the loss of the years that he would have had with his lover, but he had saved his unlife.

Unwillingly his unconscious dug up the vision of Gaius struggling with the Enforcers because his master had been careless and arrogant of his own power. His lovely young lover had died the true death, but LaCroix had saved Nicolas from this fate. With a sigh, once more LaCroix was thankful for the decision of the council that he wouldn't have to witness the death of another much beloved fledgling.

Turning his attention back to matter at hand, he made up his mind he would enjoy the few years he would have before Nicolas broke free from the conditioning. There would be good times, but not ages to learn each other. Nicolas was exhausted so LaCroix carried him to his rooms and the bath. He adoringly bathed the beautiful body, knowing how briefly he would be allowed access to it. Then he arranged Nicolas on the Roman-style couch and covered him with a peasant's sheepskin blanket.

He sighed as he went into the sitting room to wait for the rising sun so he could rest. Janette was sitting on another couch watching him cross the room to the table that held his book.

He stopped and looked at her then spoke harshly, "What brought on this sudden Council meeting?"

"Phillippe thinks it is the growing Inquisition. He thinks the Council will order us out of most of the Christian countries until it has spent itself."

"I wondered how long it would take the Council to notice that abomination."

LaCroix wandered to his chair and looked at the book as he sat down. He left it closed and leaned back. "At least Nicolas is safe from the Council now. But the price... the price was too high."

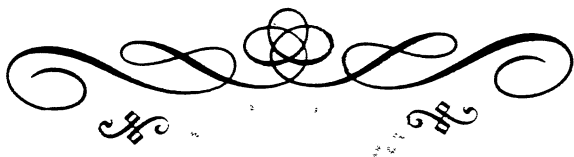
Janette reclined on her couch, knowing that what LaCroix said was true. The bonding was rushed and wouldn't remain. Nicolas would only remember that his mind and body had been raped. He wouldn't

know how difficult it had been for LaCroix to accomplish it before the Council judged them both.

She wondered how her master would take it when Nicolas finally rejected him and went his own way. She pitied him, but couldn't express sympathy. He would reject it even as he had rejected her when she brought Nicolas to him. She was now excess baggage in his life. He had found something in Nicolas that she seemed to lack. Not that he would ever abandon her. No, she just wasn't the center of his universe any more. However, she had no regrets. The new life he introduced her to was wonderful when compared to her life before LaCroix. She would always be grateful to him and her loyalty was undiminished.

LaCroix paced the room until the daylight when he went to his own sleeping couch and stretched out beside the still-sleeping Nicolas. He rested a hand on the smooth bare shoulder. Then he slept. He wouldn't sleep easily for centuries, he was certain.

the end



Limericks

by
Dee

*Nick Knight may be Forever Knight
Perhaps "Nickie," or e'en "Nick at
Night"
But LaCroix, he'd escape
Before character-rape
Makes him "swishy," however he's
hight.*



*LaCroix is a fiend, we agree
Without conscience, he murders with
glee
As undead dads go
He may be a propos
But better for Nick than for me!*

*(from Father's Day, of course)
6/11/95*





Sometime When We Leave

*by
James Kythe Walkswithwind*

The sky was dark. Wasn't it always? He was only ever out at night, all he ever saw was the darkness. He sighed. He felt old. Very, very old. How long since he'd seen the sun? How long since he'd cared?

Lacroix walked along the street, heading nowhere. The park nearby was silent, no heartbeats disturbed his solitude. Just as well as he didn't feel like feeding, and he hated to waste the nocturnal guests to the reclusive area. He kicked a rock and watched it skitter. He felt so... empty tonight.

Usually when he felt this way he went hunting or visited Nicolas, taunting him with one thing or another. But neither escape seemed appealing tonight. Actually, what he really wanted was something he didn't think he would ever have again. The rift was too great, had been there too long, for him to ever have it again....

* * *

"So what do you think?"

"I think he'll be fine. Just let him rest."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Look—he's strong, he's recovered from worse. He'll be fine."

Nick sighed, "Okay...."

Janette squeezed his hand. "Nicolas... he will be fine. He has to." She looked down at the unconscious body of Lacroix. "We will let him rest. Come...." She moved away, held out her hand to take Nick with her from the room.

"No... not just yet. I think I'll stay awhile."

Janette looked at him for a moment, then

nodded. "I will return tomorrow night. Call me if... if he wakes up." She changed what she had been about to say, but Nick didn't seem to notice the pause, or what it intimated. He nodded and didn't watch as she went. His eyes were on Lacroix who was burned, weakened, and nearly dead.

He couldn't believe it.

Nick had been on his way home, when he'd felt the pull, the clutching at his soul, his mind.... He'd never felt it before, but realized it was Lacroix. He was sensing him the way Lacroix had always felt his own presence. There were no words, but Nick felt the searing pain. He'd leapt into the sky and headed for the source of the pain. Though he wasn't sure how he did it, he zeroed in on that source of pain with unerring accuracy.

He'd found Lacroix collapsed in a parking lot... right next to a Catholic church. Janette had landed beside him at almost the same time; together they'd picked him up and carried him home. Lacroix hadn't woken, they had no idea what had happened.

Nick decided to stay until Lacroix woke up. He had to know. He had to know the man was all right. He settled into a chair beside Lacroix' bed and watched him.

Once Lacroix opened his eyes, but said nothing. He simply stared at the ceiling, needing.... Nick watched for a moment, tried saying his name but got no response. He realized suddenly what he should be doing, and flew into the kitchen to grab several bottles of blood. He returned, also with a wide-mouthed mug, and

poured some into it. The smell enticed him, but he ignored it for now. What was important was getting Lacroix to drink. He held Lacroix' head and lifted his head to the cup.

Lacroix drank two entire bottles without saying a word or even seeming to be aware of his surroundings. Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep. Nick relaxed when he saw the burns on his face begin to heal. He thought about calling Janette, but a yawn overtook him. The sun was up, and he was exhausted from the last few nights' endless work. He stood up and crawled onto the bed next to Lacroix. Draping one arm over the other's chest, as if to help him recover by sheer moral support, Nick fell asleep.

* * *

Nick felt very warm. His sleep had been filled with pleasant dreams, starring Schanke, Nat, and fish. He wasn't exactly sure what it meant, but it had been fun. He felt something move and heard through his just-waking up fog, "Nicolas?" The voice sounded quite surprised. Nick opened his eyes and saw Lacroix staring at him.

"Lacroix!" He sat up quickly. "Are you all right? How do you feel?"

"Confused... and amazed. Why are you in my bed?"

Nick checked Lacroix' face, and the burns were completely gone. "You called me... you were hurt, burned. I... I was afraid you might die. Janette and I brought you here. You... you didn't look well, so I stayed. Are you all right?"

Lacroix heard the genuine concern in Nicolas' voice. He kept himself from smiling, easily done by remembering last night. "I feel fine, now. Did you... feed me?"

"Two bottles. You slept after."

Lacroix nodded. "Thank you, Nicolas."

"You're all right?" Nick had the feeling he'd asked this before.

"Yes, Nicolas. I am fine."

"Good." Nick nodded. He wondered if he should leave now. Well, first there was something else. "What happened?"

Lacroix looked away and stared at the blankets. He leaned against the headboard and debated whether or not to say anything. Then he sighed. "I wanted to know... what it was like...

what it was.... I've seen you, go inside a church, hold a cross, shake the hand of a priest with only the least amount of discomfort. I wanted to know... what kind of strength that took."

Nick was completely taken aback. It hadn't been the answer he'd expected. He had no clue what to say. He just stared at Lacroix as the older vampire tugged nervously at the sheets. "So now I know. And I must say... regardless of your... reasons, I am impressed. You have a strength... I do not have." Nick didn't hear resignation in Lacroix' voice, only simple concession. It was as if the vampire was simply admitting they were two different people with different values and different abilities.

He felt a surge of... something at the realization. "Thank you."

Lacroix glanced up with a ghost of a grin. "You're welcome."

They simply smiled for a few moments, then Nick cleared his throat. "I should call Janette."

"The sun will be down in a few hours. She'll come over and find out I'm all right. Whether you call or not, she'll come. Save yourself the trouble." He smiled.

Nick nodded, somewhat nervously. "I suppose I should..." Well, he couldn't leave, he realized. The sun was up.

Lacroix saw the still full bottles lying on the floor. "I regret I cannot offer you something to drink."

"That's all right." Nick's voice was soft.

Lacroix looked at him and was amused by the irony. Wasn't this what he'd been despairing would never happen? He was glad Nick couldn't hear his thoughts.

"But I can... sort of." He teased, grinning when Lacroix' eyes grew wide.

"You..."

"I don't know why, but... you called me when you were hurt. And ever since... I can feel some things. I imagine you could hide them from me, if you wanted," Nick shrugged.

"I can see that I will have to," Lacroix' usual tone of deceit sounded in his words. Then his voice softened, "But not yet." The eager, uncertain, hopefulness was too hard to vocalize. He looked at Nick, wondering.

This time Nick's eyes grew wide. His breath escaped in a wordless whisper, "You..." He

paused. After so long? You still...? he thought the words.

Lacroix let the need, the truth, and the love show in his face and mind. "I have always needed you, Nicolas."

Nick swallowed. He hadn't expected Lacroix' feelings to remain after so many centuries of hatred and fighting. He'd thought the love had long since turned to stone. But he saw in Lacroix' eyes the same burning passion that he'd seen the first night and that he'd felt almost every night for the first fifty years—it seemed like no time at all.

And he felt the same passion burning inside his own chest, spreading though his body as he saw the way Lacroix looked at him, drawing him closer with a glance. Nick leaned forward in a flash and kissed Lacroix. His thoughts telegraphing his motion, Lacroix met him, grabbing at his arm and opening his mouth to greet him.

* * *

Nick felt Lacroix' tongue encounter his—running over his teeth, tasting his mouth; Nick did the same, revelling in the sensations he thought he only half-remembered. Lacroix brought a hand up and began undoing buttons, fingers gently brushing against Nick's skin, tantalizing and promising of future touches. Nick leaned back and removed his shirt once the buttons were all open. Lacroix took advantage of the moment and removed his own shirt. Then, after an almost unnoticeable hesitation, he removed his pants and underwear as well. Nick remained where he was, leaning against the headboard and began to unzip his jeans. Lacroix pushed Nick's hands out of the way and slowly brought the zipper down. He ran his hands down the sides of Nick's legs. Nick leaned his head back feeling a groan beginning deep in his throat. If Lacroix kept on, the moan would soon become a growl. Lacroix ran his hands all the way down to Nick's feet, where he quickly removed the socks. He crawled back up to the top of Nick's jeans and stopped.

He smiled at Nick. "You must admit the current fashions are much easier to remove...."

Nick laughed. Lacroix grinned and pulled the jeans down, just past the hips. He gave Nick an appreciative "hmm" at the sight of the black silk boxers. Nick grinned, knowing they had been

bought because of Lacroix' influence. His mentor always loved the feel of silk. Lacroix leaned forward and down, then rubbed his cheek against the fabric.

Nick felt his muscles tighten, and he wanted desperately to rip his jeans off and get on with it. Lacroix smiled at his sudden explosion of need and even more slowly ran his chin along the bulge of fabric.

"Oh..., Lucien!" Nick hissed through clenched teeth. Lacroix relented for a moment and pushed himself back, dragging Nick's jeans down with him. Nick kicked them off then lay still, waiting.

Lacroix lay down on Nick's legs, so that his head came to Nick's stomach. He propped himself up on his elbows and ran his fingers over the black silk.

"Wonderful," He murmured. "I love silk." Then he pressed his cheek against Nick's hip bone rubbing his face against the conspicuously growing bulge in the middle. Lacroix grinned in mischievous playfulness, and very, very lightly, so Nick could barely feel it, ran his finger along the ridge.

Nick groaned again; the groan turned into a growl at the end. He grabbed the sheets, bunching them in his fists to keep himself from thrusting his hips towards Lacroix. He knew Lacroix could tease him for hours, and he knew he'd love every second of it if he could force himself to be patient.

He took a deep breath and let his muscles relax. Lacroix smiled, and kept running his finger down, along the inside of Nick's thigh.

* * *

Nick arched his back and growled. Lacroix sighed in contentment—he was going to make this last just as long as he could. He smiled and traced the fabric again with one fingernail.

Nick raised his legs a little, rubbing them against Lacroix', feeling the other man's skin against his own. He wanted to grab him, pull him closer, pull him in..., but he resisted the urge, allowing Lacroix torment him a little longer before the release. He rubbed one leg against Lacroix' side, urging him on. He let his hands begin tracing the curves of his face; Lacroix kissed a few fingers as they went by.

Then he leaned down and kissed a place on

Nicolas' thigh, right near the edge of his boxers. Lacroix nuzzled the spot, teasing the fabric higher away from Nick's leg, caressing the skin. His tongue flicked out and tasted the quivering flesh. Nick groaned again. His hands were permanently curled in balls around the wadded sheets as he waited.

Lacroix moved to the other thigh and repeated the nuzzle then the licks. Nick's shorts were beginning to become bunched up around his legs as Lacroix slowly pushed them higher, revealing more bare skin which he softly and delicately caressed.

Nick rested his hands on Lacroix' shoulders as a hint that he might push him down onto him. He didn't push, though, he let Lacroix take his time. He enjoyed the sensation of Lacroix' fingers and tongue tracing every inch of his skin that his shorts could reveal without actually taking them off.

Then Lacroix sat up, on his knees, and pulled Nick's shorts down around his legs and then completely off. Nick lay completely still with Lacroix kneeling between his legs, smiling at him in passionate hunger.... Nick was ready to start screaming. Lacroix grinned and leaned down again. His picked up where he'd left off, on a place high on the inside of Nick's thigh. His cheek brushed against Nick's balls. Nick spread his legs wider hoping Lacroix would take the hint and move his head....

Lacroix licked each little spot of skin surrounding his genitals, only brushing them by *accident* as he went. Nick felt as if he were simply going to explode and to hell with how far Lacroix had gotten. Then he felt the moist warmth of Lacroix' mouth engulf him. If his muscles hadn't already been tense, they would have tightened now. Nick leaned back, pushing his head farther into the pillow, trying to let himself submit even more than he was. He heard a growling in the back of his throat, as Lacroix moved up and down, licking every inch of skin. Nick heard Lacroix' answering growl softly begin. Nick could feel the vibration against his leg, where Lacroix lay, as he moved his tongue over Nicolas.

And then he took him whole inside his mouth. Nick closed his eyes as he felt Lacroix take him completely inside; he could feel the back of Lacroix' throat with every thrust downward. Their growls were now in sync, punctuated by Nick's gasps for breath, and Lacroix' deep subvocal whispers of pleasure....

* * *

Nick moaned. He felt almost ready to come. He knew Lacroix could feel it, too, as he tried one more time to swallow Nicolas whole. Then right as Nick felt like the world was about to disappear, Lacroix let him go and extended his fangs. With a loving snarl he went down, sinking his fangs into the softest place between Nick's leg and crotch. Nick screamed in ecstasy as Lacroix drank from him, the blood sweetened by the wash of hormones coursing through him.

Lacroix drank deep, swallowing mouthfuls of blood. Then he stopped, not wanting to weaken Nick too much, and he raised his head. He smiled to see Nick lying absolutely still, his orgasm cut off in the middle by Lacroix' bite. As he watched, Nick began to whimper, still hard and waiting for the release. Lacroix let him suffer for a moment, then put his hand gently around the shaft of Nick's penis and began to rub.

Within seconds Nick came to orgasm. Lacroix smiled at Nick's sigh, and watched as the muscles in Nick's body began to relax. He continued rubbing, gently, not to make him hard again but simply to let Nick feel the motion of his fingers. Besides, Lacroix enjoyed the feel, and he was almost ready to take his own pleasure. With a knowing smile, Nick wrapped his legs around Lacroix' waist, holding himself up from the mattress.

Lacroix moved his hand off of Nick and used the spilled ejaculate to lubricate his own erection, and then pushed himself without pretense inside Nick. Their moans were again in time with each other. Nick held himself firmly up in the air, giving Lacroix the angle he needed, and Lacroix pushed himself down, deeper into Nicolas. Lacroix closed his eyes, savoring the feel of the tightness around him, savoring the resistance of Nick's muscles, as Nick tightened then relaxed, encouraging Lacroix to push deeper still.

As he felt Lacroix enter all the way, Nick let out a shuddering moan, and he put his hands on top of Lacroix', where they lay on Nick's sides. He rubbed his hands up and down Lacroix' arms, and began pushing himself upwards in rhythm with Lacroix' thrusts. Soon those thrusts became automatic, as Lacroix lost himself in the sensations of the skin and the sounds of his and Nick's moaning. His breath began to come in pants, and he

opened his eyes to look at Nicolas, laying beneath him, an expression of total joy and sexual need on his face. The vision of his lover in the thrall of his love brought Lacroix nearly to orgasm.

He pushed himself in, hearing Nick's unintended whimper at the pressure which was almost pain. It was totally orgasmic, totally rapture. Lacroix felt himself nearing, nearing... and his legs began to tremble then suddenly he was thrusting, coming, inside Nicolas. The orgasm pushed him over the edge of awareness, until all he knew was the heat, the wetness, the tight muscles encasing him, and the eruption of pleasure coming from within his very soul.

Lacroix sat on his heels, spent, but staying inside sweet Nicolas until he had gone completely soft. Nick just smiled at him, leaving his legs around Lacroix' waist, letting the urge to laugh aloud fade away unspoken. He realized that he was so happy, so happy that his love was alive, well, and feeling so good. When Lacroix leaned forward and lay down on top of him, Nick kissed him on the forehead.

Lacroix smiled and joined Nick for a mental sigh and fading laughter, and then snuggled against him with his head on Nicolas' chest. Nick wrapped his arms around Lacroix, holding him close. He waited as Lacroix fell asleep and lay there for several minutes, listening to his breath, and the beginning of his dreams.

Nick snuggled in, his face resting against the top of Lacroix' head, and he fell asleep with a grin on his face.

Ten minutes later Janette opened the front door and called out softly. When no one answered, she climbed the stairs to check on Lacroix. When she saw the two lying together, she giggled and tip-toed away.

* * *

Nick and Lacroix lay in the bed still cuddled. They didn't speak, nor move; they simply lay together, enjoying the tender silence that encircled them. Nick had phoned Janette to tell her Lacroix was fine but she had laughed and said she knew and asked if she should send over a bottle of the House's Best.

Nick just snarled something catty, and she hung up, laughing. Lacroix laughed at him, too, not

the least bit embarrassed. Nick seriously considered sticking his tongue out at him, but he was afraid Lacroix would take it as an invitation to suck it out of his face. Not that he objected, but he needed a little while longer to recover.

Lacroix had settled against Nick's chest, and they lay there. It was close to midnight, and Nick didn't have to work tonight. He marveled for a moment at the sheer joy and ease with which he lay here, someplace he hadn't ever expected to be again.

Then Lacroix began tracing his fingers around the circle of Nick's left nipple.

Nick waited a moment, then asked, "What are you doing?"

With a amused tone Lacroix answered, "Teasing your nipple."

"I know that. I meant, why are you doing it?" Nick sounded almost as amused as Lacroix.

"Ah. Well, because it makes them hard."

Nick waited for a moment, to see if Lacroix was going to offer any more explanation. When none was forthcoming, he said, "and?"

"And? Oh, yes... well..." Lacroix pulled himself close, speaking only inches from Nick's face. His voice a tantalizing whisper, "Would you like me to tell you or show you?"

Nick stared at him, feeling the passion stirring again. He smiled and said in a strained and eager voice, "Tell me first."

Lacroix smiled. He continued to play with Nick's nipples as he said, "I am going to tease your left nipple, until... well it is already quite hard. Then I will move to the right one and do the same thing. I am going to tease your nipples until you are quite aroused, until you are hard and you can't quite breathe."

"Then I am going to slowly run my fingers down your stomach until I reach the very tip of your cock. I am going to grab it and slowly brush my fingernails up and down the shaft, and I am going to watch you tremble and listen to you moan. Then, and only once you have begun to ask me to do more, will I begin to insert my fingers inside you. One finger at a time, pushing myself inside you, deeper and harder each time I go in. And once I have three fingers inside you, I will keep pushing them inside you until you start begging me to push you over."

"At that point I will remove my fingers and torment you with my tongue, scraping every tender

spot you have with the tips of my fangs. I won't ever bite you, but one spot on your left buttock will receive the tiniest pinprick. And once you have received this lightest, most teasing stimulation, I am going to grab your arms and toss you onto your stomach." Lacroix' face was barely touching Nick's, as he whispered the words in Nick's ear, brushing his chin against Nick's jawbone as he continued simply playing with Nick's nipples. He smiled, "And I am going to fuck you until we both come."

Nick gave a weak, "Uhh...." Then he said, "I think I already did."

Lacroix hesitated a moment and then began laughing.

* * *

Nick lay in bed, waiting for the sun to go down. Lacroix was still sleeping, curled up against him. He didn't move, so as not to wake him.

Lacroix opened his eyes and mumbled, "Why are you awake?"

Nick grinned, and looked down at his sleep-groggy lover. "I have to go to work soon. The sun's almost down."

"You work tonight?" Lacroix sounded awake and carefully not upset.

"Mm... yes. We're almost ready to close two cases. I have to go in."

Lacroix nodded. Then cautiously, keeping the hope hidden away because two days ago he wouldn't have even dreamed of asking, he asked, "Will I see you tonight?" He knew the answer he wanted to hear but wouldn't force it on Nick. If he said no, then he would accept his decision gracefully.

Nick smiled. "Of course."

Lacroix' smile spread across his face. He leaned forward and kissed Nick. He kissed him again, running his tongue over Nick's teeth.

Nick pushed him reluctantly away. "I have to get dressed."

"If you must..." Lacroix stood up and moved away from the bed. He helped Nick locate his clothes, handing him a few items that had been dropped on his side of the bed.

Nick accepted a shirt and put it on before realizing it wasn't the one he'd worn over here. He looked down at it and recognized Lacroix' shirt. He could smell the older vampire in the fabric. He ran

his hand over it, smiling. In a few more minutes the sun would be down, he would have just enough time to go home, get his car, and drive to work like a normal human.

He started to tuck his shirt in when Lacroix held up a hand.

"Wait a minute." Nick stopped, and watched as Lacroix went to a drawer, and pulled something out. He waited, a curious smile on his face, as Lacroix was blocking the thought from him, of what he was doing. Lacroix came over, and pulled Nick's pants back down.

"We don't have time...", Nick teased.

"I know. Just relax...", Lacroix pulled Nick's underwear down, and showed him three metal rings, connected by a single leather strap. Nick's eyes got big, and he watched as Lacroix slipped the rings around him, pushing them snugly on. "There. A gift..." he grinned and kissed Nick again, then pulled his pants back up, and tucked in the shirt for him. Nick felt the cold metal, the almost tight pressure, and the inevitable response.

"I won't be able to work... how am I going to concentrate?"

Lacroix just smiled. "That, dear Nicolas, is your problem. Don't take it off." The hint of a warning came through; Nick heard it and felt a thrill run down his spine. "Now... go."

Nick gathered up one last kiss and left. He flew home and went right for the fridge. He opened a bottle and drained it, starving not only from the loss of blood, but from not having fed at Lacroix'. He downed the bottle quickly and then headed downstairs to go to work. With every step the metal pulled at him, reminding him of what was waiting for him when the sun began to rise.

He knew he could call in sick and go back to Lacroix now, but he also knew that if he let the tension build, the desire and hunger would drive him not only nearly mad, but right into the state of desperately needing release. By the time he got to Lacroix in the morning, he would be ready and willing to do anything for that release. And Nick knew that waiting, torture though it may be, would be, oh, so worth it. He just hoped his jacket would continue to hide the erection that was already pressing against his jeans.

Later that night, as he and Schanke drove, looking for their last suspect, he heard the Nightcrawler on the radio.

"Tonight, I want to play something special. Let's see... 'Cherish' no, hmm... 'Hey, Mickey'? nah...."

Nick had a hard time not laughing out loud. To Lacroix he thought, "Stop it! It's bad enough to tease me, but must you torture your listeners?"

Lacroix' laughter rang in his mind. "All right, I found it. This one is for you, little one."

Nick smiled, as "The One" began to play over the airwaves.

"I saw you dancing out the ocean/running fast, along the sand

A spirit born, of earth and water/ fire flying from your hands

In the instant that you love someone/in the second that the

hammer hits

Reality runs up your spine/ and the pieces finally fit

And all I ever needed was the One/ like freedom feels where wild

horses run

When stars collide like you and I/ No shadows block the sun

*You're all I've ever needed/ Baby, you're the One"**

* * *

Nick raced out of the precinct. He had been waiting for the shift to end ever since he had arrived eight hours before. The rings had been driving him to distraction all night; his jacket had luckily hidden his erection, and everyone was used to him being distracted anyway. Now, free from the fetters of work, he ran to his car.

He needed to get over to Lacroix', and let him take the damn thing off! ... or not. But he had to do something... Nick found himself gripping the steering wheel almost hard enough to leave imprints. He forced himself to relax and concentrate on the traffic. He tried not to rub himself as he headed across town. He wasn't entirely sure Lacroix wanted him to relieve himself in that fashion, and he had a feeling he didn't want to upset Lacroix tonight.

A half hour later he pulled into the underground garage beneath Lacroix' place. He locked the door and quickly ran to the stairs. The elevator was too slow, with his vampiric speed he

could get to Lacroix' door in seconds. Finally he was there, raising his hand to knock.

The door flew open. Nick started to greet Lacroix, when he saw the snarl on his face. He felt, however, the joy beneath it and knew what was going to happen. Nick froze in place. Lacroix just grabbed his jacket and pulled him inside.

"What's wrong?" He asked, his voice stammering. He felt the passion stirring and the excitement of not knowing how far Lacroix was willing to go; the desire that had been growing was finally ready to be fulfilled.

Lacroix dragged him into the back room, not saying anything except growling something about having had enough of Nicolas. Nick wasn't exactly sure what he meant, and he tried to ask.

"Shut up!" Lacroix snapped, giving him a face full of vampiric rage. Nick recoiled and felt fear growing beside the passion. He kept himself from whimpering... with some trouble.

Lacroix brought him into the bedroom and flung him down on the floor. "Did you have the decency to fulfill my wishes?" His voice was harsh, hissing, and Nick wished he were anywhere else... except this was exactly where he wanted to be.

"Wha... what do you mean?" His heart fluttered on its beat. The floor was hard beneath his hands, and he wondered if Lacroix was going to leave him here.

"I told you to wear it!"

Nick nodded quickly. He had left it on, and he knew now it was a very good thing.

"Show me!" Lacroix was standing above him. Nick reached for his zipper, hands shaking. He got his pants undone and pulled them open just enough to show Lacroix the cock ring was still in place. Lacroix growled something that might have been approval and reached down again. He grabbed Nick's collar and tossed him onto the bed. Nick lay still, trying to get his bearings before turning to face Lacroix when he felt Lacroix' hands on him.

Suddenly Lacroix was tearing his clothes off, ripping fabric then throwing the shredded clothes onto the floor. Soon Nick was huddled naked on the bed dressed only by three rings of metal and a strap of leather. He swallowed and hoped Lacroix would give him some clue as what to do next. He felt the hunger burning inside him tinged with the delicious taste of fear and sexual desire. Every sense was sharpened by the adrenalin that coursed through his

body, and he released himself to go with it. He cringed when Lacroix reached for him.

With a snarl, Lacroix grabbed the cock ring and pulled it off. Nick couldn't stop the outcry. He felt the pain explode in his groin and he tried to scramble backwards away from the hands that came at him. His whimpers, as he lay back on the bed, were mixed with terror and ecstasy. Lacroix stood by the bed, glaring down at him.

"Now I will make you pay..." Lacroix moved to a dresser and removed something from the middle drawer.

"What have I done?" Nick asked timidly.

"You know what you've done!" Lacroix shouted, but inside he assured Nicolas that it was all for the play. He didn't want Nick to truly believe this was revenge for their fighting, for their centuries apart. Nick felt the assurance and relaxed inside. Outside he tensed. Just because Lacroix loved him didn't mean he wouldn't hurt him.

Lacroix grabbed his wrists; and before Nick realized what was happening, his wrists were tied with rope to the bedposts. He protested and tugged at them. It wasn't their strength that held him, but the sure knowledge that Lacroix would be infuriated if he tried to get free. His only hope now was to appease his lover.

Lacroix looked down at Nick spread-eagled on the bed. He was almost ready. He went to another drawer and removed two more items. One was wrapped in black fabric, and Nick couldn't tell what it was. It was heavy, though, for Lacroix dropped it with a thud on the mattress between Nick's legs. The other item Lacroix brought forward.

Roughly spreading Nick's legs farther apart, Lacroix grabbed his genitals and placed the hard metal ring around his cock. It was smaller than the cock ring he'd worn all day. Nick wasn't at first sure what the purpose of this one was. He looked up at Lacroix with a bewildered expression. Lacroix just snarled, "You'll find out soon enough, dear Nicolas."

Nicolas waited. He knew it would hurt, the question was simply whether he could take the pain long enough to please Lacroix. He took a deep breath and tried to ready himself.

Lacroix laughed, and the cruel sound cut through him. He wanted to scream his fear but knew that it was too soon. He bit his lip, and his

legs tensed up because Lacroix was crawling onto the bed kneeling between his legs. Nick wanted to cry out to make him stop; he wanted to cry out for him to continue.

Lacroix bent down and tore Nick's leg with his fangs. Nick cried out, his body tensing, and he felt himself try to scoot back, but Lacroix held his leg. He didn't drink, he just tore the skin and muscle. His hand gripped Nick's knee, and his fingers tightened until Nick could feel the bones grinding. He squirmed, and his muscles shivered. He had never quite felt this way for a very long time; the pain made the lust stronger in ways he'd forgotten. He wanted to push his knee up into Lacroix' hand, to make the pain sharper. He wanted to pull Lacroix into him and make the vampire fuck him.

But he waited, knowing the sweet flavor waiting would bring. He moaned, though, letting some of the pain escape. Lacroix growled in return and leaned back onto his heels. He removed the object from the fabric, and began coating it with lubricant. Nick's gaze was captured by the thick metal rod.

Then he suddenly felt an unbearable pain in his cock, as the metal tightened around him. He realized the ring was too small. His erection had grown as far as it could, and now the metal was biting into him, and he realized that the metal was too tight to let him come. He let out a wavering cry and tried to bring his hands down to remove the ring. He couldn't, though; the ropes held him back. His legs shook as he tried to bring them together to brush the ring off, but Lacroix sat firmly between his legs, laughing.

"I told you you'd find out what it was for. You aren't going anywhere until I'm ready to let you go..."

With that he pulled Nick upwards, and with a snarl of frustration he put one leg over his shoulder. Slightly on his side now, Nick tried again to pull away, then he felt the cold metal against his buttocks. Lacroix growled and then shoved the rod inside Nick.

He screamed. The cold metal was larger than anything he'd ever taken in before. He tried moving away, but Lacroix held him down with his free hand. Lacroix held the rod steadily inside him, and Nick's own motions made the rod thrust and push inside him.

He couldn't move away for his attempts drove it deeper. Nick felt a burst of orgasm trying to explode; his rectal muscles began quivering on their own. He wanted to slam himself down on the rod, onto Lacroix' hand. He wanted Lacroix to hold the rod steady so he could bring himself off. He began pushing steadily, panting and gasping as the waves threatened to crash over him.

And he couldn't come because the ring held him. He cried out in pain and frustration, wanting to come but not able to. He felt himself ready to black out or explode, and he forced himself harder onto the rod in hopes he would force himself to come despite the ring. His screams ripped his throat, and he barely heard Lacroix' voice saying, "Oh, yes... yes, Nicolas..." with as much passion as Nick felt.

Finally, when he thought he would die from frustration, Lacroix leaned over and with his teeth removed the ring. The touch of his tongue, and then his mouth as he encased Nick was the final blow. Nick came to orgasm in a mighty rush; he felt as if the universe was going to explode with his cries. Every muscle in his body spasmed as he came, the wave seemingly lasting forever.

His cries began to die down, as his body released its pent up energy. Nick's lip quivered, as did his voice, as the last of the waves left him. He lay still, only trying to breathe for a moment.

When his vision cleared, he noticed that he was laying on his back, staring at the ceiling. His arms were free; the tremors that shook his body had snapped the ropes like string. And the rod was gone, Lacroix had removed it sometime earlier. Nick looked over, and found Lacroix lying next to him, smiling. It was a tender, happy smile this time. He leaned over and kissed Nick.

Nick smiled back. Then he said in a weak voice, "I don't think I can do this more than once a century."

Lacroix smiled. "Yes, well... here's to the next century." He toasted Nicolas by kissing him again, a long deep passionate kiss that let through all the love that had driven them together this day.

He let Nicolas snuggle into his arms, exhausted. He knew his turn would come soon enough.

* * *

Lacroix as watched Nick breathed deeply, trying to regain his strength. He felt the passion, the

love, and the joy filling him as he watched his lover lay in his arms. He also felt the erection that pressed hard against his pants.

When Nick opened his eyes, somewhat recovered, Lacroix sat up. He calmly removed his clothing, dropping it behind him on the floor. Nick smiled as he lay back down, their skin touching in countless places. Lacroix kissed him again, ready to wait patiently until Nick was recovered.

Nick grinned and sat up. Then he crawled down along his lover's body, close to a classic 69. His stomach was on Lacroix' chest, one leg on either side of his head. But his genitals were out of Lacroix' reach for he held himself low enough on Lacroix' body to prevent any temptation. He looked down at the hard erection that waited for him.

Lacroix lay back, not moving. He felt the weight of Nick's body on him, holding him down. He placed a hand on Nick's leg and on the back of his knee. The same one he'd broken earlier though now the bones were almost healed. Lacroix waited.

Nick breathed onto the skin and watched as the cock jumped in response. He grinned, and his tongue flicked out, on the very tip of the head. Another jump. He touched the very, very tip with the tip of his tongue, so lightly at first there was almost no contact. Then he slowly began to push down. He was almost pushing his mouth down onto Lacroix, then he moved his tongue and opened his mouth wide. And his fangs came out.

He scraped his teeth along the shaft, ripping the foreskin and the tender flesh beneath. Nick brought his head up and down again, ripping skin with each stroke. He felt Lacroix arch his body, and swallow his scream. Nick smiled as best he could, and went down again. Then he left the cock and moved to the balls. He did the same thing, with each motion he ripped into the skin. He was more delicate this time, leaving each ball with only the shallowest of scratches.

He crawled farther down, bending his neck to get a better angle, and began to scrape the space behind Lacroix' genitals, between his legs. Nick left many streaks of red on the skin, each time he made a new one Lacroix groaned, then screamed. Nick dug his fingers into Lacroix' thighs, drawing more blood. The smell was beginning to overpower him, the taste of blood spilling into his mouth.

More to torture himself, he pulled his fangs in and began licking Lacroix. He licked all over the

shaft, his balls, the insides of his thighs. He sucked gently on the skin, drawing little bits of Lacroix into his mouth. It was all Lacroix could do to groan and scream. He held tighter to Nick's legs.

Nick smiled and pulled Lacroix' cock into his mouth as far as it would go. Gently, in sharp contrast to the shredding he'd done with his teeth, Nick sucked him. He felt Lacroix begin to orgasm, his legs began to tremble and the scream of release began to build in his throat. Just when Lacroix was ready to come, Nick moved his mouth and bit into the soft flesh low on Lacroix' stomach. He drank deeply as Lacroix came....

The blood nourished him, filled him, and cascaded through him. It tasted old and familiar, like it was his own. He drank deeply, holding Lacroix down even as he reached the end of his orgasm. Lacroix lay still, fully spent, and listened to the pounding of Nick's heart, as his blood was drawn out into his lover's mouth.

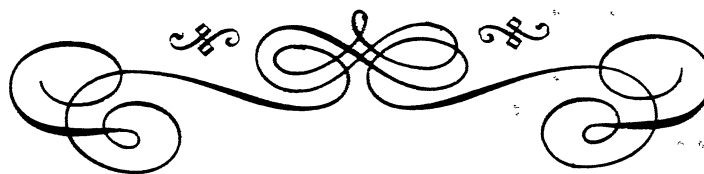
Finally Nick stopped drinking. He spun himself around, still on top of Lacroix. He grinned, to see Lacroix laying limp, exhausted but for the brightness in his eyes. He met Nick's gaze and returned the smile.

Nick asked, "Can we sleep, now?" The tone was so cheery, and yet so impudent (as if he hadn't noticed what had just happened) that Lacroix began to laugh. He pulled Nick to him and held him close. Nick laughed with him, until they dissolved into occasional giggles and smiles. They exchanged a few kisses, not stirring up any more passion. Then Nick slid off Lacroix, to lie next to him, and reached down to pull the sheets over them.

They wrapped themselves in the silk, and Lacroix rolled over to sleep spoon fashion. Nick tucked his face into the back of Lacroix' neck, and soon they were sound asleep.

The End

**"The One" copyright 1992 Big Pig Music Ltd.
Written by Bernie Taupin and Elton John.*



Truce

by
tasha

Author's note: This story should be considered as a part of the "Odds Against" and "Metamorphosis" universe from the first two issues of "Dark Fantasies"; however, I do think "Truce" will stand on its own. It's more Nick's story than Starsky and Hutch's or Bodie and Doyle's.

"Truce" may not quite agree with the timeline in the flashback shown in the episode "Father Figure." It is unknown from the episode exactly what date Nicolas, Janette, and LaCroix are in London during the Second World War. It should be noted that Nicolas and LaCroix are wearing British Army uniforms consistent with that era and that London is being bombed. So "Truce" doesn't completely conflict with it, either.

Prologue

The full, gleaming moon was becoming visible in the Detective Knight's skylight. The calm Toronto evening was broken only by the occasional cloud floating slowly across the bulging orb, obscuring the nearby stars. Not noticing the celestial display, Detective Nick Knight rested on his black leather sofa and tried to relax on one of his infrequent nights off. Squirming on the soft leather and unable to get comfortable, he finally rose to pace the room.

The current murder investigation seemed to be going nowhere. He checked in regularly with Natalie, but she hadn't identified the chemical on the victim and most of the other tests weren't back either. There was nothing from the states or RCMP. The case was on the back burner at the moment, hence his night off. He walked to the kitchen and flung open his refrigerator then grimaced at the half-empty, long necked bottle. The feeling of depression had been growing over the past couple of days. Nick walked the length of his loft then finally he flung on his jacket to cover his shoulder holster and hurried down to the Caddy.

He reached The Raven a few minutes later and sat for a few moments looking at the black bird

on the front of the premises. It was always the same thing; when mortal life got complicated he ran to Janette, perhaps not for sympathy which he rarely got, but simply for company of his own kind. Right now, he needed a distraction. Perhaps the Raven would provide one.

Disgusted with himself, he slid out from under the steering wheel and left the car sitting in a no-parking zone. He was confident that the beat cop would recognize it and overlook ticketing it.

Entering the club, he settled at the bar and observed the patrons, dancing, drinking, or attempting to make conversation. He turned down a drink from the bartender. Smoke and noise filled the Raven as patrons forgot their cares and woes just as Nick was trying to do.

Chairs rattled as customers came and went about their business in the Raven; there were exchanges of both legal and illegal substances. Keeping his profession to himself, Detective Nicholas Knight of Metro Homicide leaned against the bar and idly noted the huge bartender refilling drinks for two blond women. He saw that they were both a little drunk and seemed uninterested in anyone else in the bar. Janette circulated between dancing couples, smiling at various acquaintances. She wandered over and sat beside Nick for a few

minutes.

"Nicolas," her breathy voice giving his name the French intonation. "Slumming, I presume." The bartender sat down a wine glass which she picked up and licked the rim before sipping. "You are not here for information, are you? Because I'm fresh out."

"No, Janette. I just needed a break from a case we've been working on."

"Poor Nicolas," she whispered mockingly, leaning forward to look him in the eye. "Always so concerned about *his* cases."

The bartender signaled for Janette, and she rose to her feet, giving Nick a light peck on the cheek. Nick watched her walk the length of the bar and lean over to talk to the bartender. Her dress was tight in all the right places, he decided.

He didn't immediately notice when the door to the street opened, and two figures came down the steps, sidling between dancers toward the bar. Then there was an peculiar surge in the atmosphere of the club, the detective turned and watched the latest customers moving across the room. He was puzzled momentarily by the haunting familiarity of the aura until he saw a flaxen head of hair reflected in the dim, oscillating lights. For Nick, time distorted as the tall, slender figure came unerringly across the crowded floor accompanied by a shorter stockier man. For endless moments Nick was once more in a chateau in occupied France more than 50 years ago, trying to teach a hot-headed young vampire how to survive. It had been a difficult time for both of them. His rescue of the American pilot had been a spur of the moment idea to frustrate LaCroix. Finding the pilot nearly dead, he had been forced to bring him across. It had been successful—one of the few times where his heart had led him in the right direction.

He wondered briefly if the American's companion was the same as the one he had spoken about in the endless nights hiding on the coast of France waiting for contact by the local underground.

Nick slid away from the bar to be grabbed into a hard bear hug from one of his own kin, one of his own children. He had never tied this child of his to him as his own mentor had leashed himself. Knight was gratified to feel the healthy, unsullied gleam in the ambience that easily intertwined with his own.

"Nicolas," the blond breathed into his ear, giving the French intonation to Nick's name. The

American pulled back to arm's length and smiled a wide toothy smile. "It's great to find you after all these years."

Knight returned the smile and whispered fervently, "Hutchinson!" For the time being, Nick was without words as he looked at his child of The Blood. He had deliberately avoided contact with the American pilot and had opened no doors to the vampire community at large for his protege. "And how did you manage after all these years?"

"When you logged on the NCIC computer a couple of weeks ago, Starsk was able to trace you back to the precinct 96 in Toronto. Easy as pie when you know how. It was especially easy to find you when you had merely translated the name I knew you by into English. Not exactly the best disguise." Hutch gestured to his grinning companion. "We thought we'd take a few days and come up here to surprise you."

"Well, you did manage that," Knight answered, watching the vibes between the two men. There was a palpable intimacy even though the two weren't touching. He finally identified the link as similar to the one between he and Hutch but with an addition. Yes, Hutch had made this vampire as he himself had brought Hutch across or as LaCroix had created Nicolas, the vampire. But the addition was of slightly different nature than either of the above. He was sure this was a bond that was made in love.

"Nick, I want you to meet David Starsky. You may remember we spoke of him decades ago," Hutch grinned as he shoved the shorter, dark-haired man toward his guide from a troubled time.

Starsky held out his hand and Knight grasped it firmly, answering Hutch, "Yes; I remember our discussions." As Starsky's eyes shifted between his two companions, Nick continued, "I see everything worked out well."

"Better than well," Hutch answered just before he was jostled by an enthusiastic and drunken dancer.

"This really isn't the best place for a family reunion," Starsky observed, needing to raise his voice to a near shout as the band on the stage began a piece with a heavy metal beat that reverberated off the wall and nearly setting the hanging chains rattling from sound waves alone.

Acknowledging the succinct point, Knight led the way around behind the bar and down a dimly lit hallway into a small room that Janette

occasionally used for entertaining her friends.

"Tell me, what have you been doing with yourself since the war?" he asked Hutch as they walked side-by-side. Starsky trailed along behind, watching both men with interest. He had heard a lot about this mysterious figure from Hutch. Starsky was bit disappointed; Nicolas seemed so normal and almost human.

"We hung out with George Cowley's mob until it began to become obvious that we weren't aging normally. So we came back to the states and have done a lot of different things," Hutch paused and looked at the once very familiar features of his mentor. "How about you?"

"Like you, I stayed in Europe for a while after the war then went to the States for a while and finally here to Toronto." Nick opened the door into Janette's sitting room. The three entered and settled themselves on the comfortable furniture.

The reunion was a friendly one that ended with the nearing of the dawn. Nick invited the two Americans to stay at the loft, but was turned down. They had made their own arrangements. Nick made an appointment to meet with them back at the Raven the next night when he got off shift for a further reunion.

Watching the cab, carry away the young vampires, Nick slowly walked toward the Caddy. He was being overwhelmed with memories, memories that he had hidden away and didn't want to replay. But the images were becoming crystal clear. As he drove down the streets to the Gateway loft, he tried to push the recollections back to the dim recesses of his mind where they belonged. Nevertheless, they were not to be denied....

His last action was to put the green Cadillac in the garage and close the door in defense against the imminent daylight. The images overwhelmed him as the garage door rattled shut. He didn't want to relive these things after all this time. He had thought he had put it behind him forever.

* * *

France 1943

Nicolas was miserable. It wasn't the cold and damp of the atmosphere that bothered him; it was the location. As a card-carrying, blood-sucking vampire, taking refuge in the basement of an ancient Catholic church on the outskirts of Paris probably

wasn't the wisest decision he'd ever made. However, finding himself in the vicinity after his last mission without enough time before sunrise to get to his normal hideaway, he had taken up the invitation of the parish priest. The priest had seemed to understand that his guest wasn't quite the normal member of the maquis, and didn't question Nicolas' request to spend the day in the cellar.

His last mission for the underground had taken him farther afield than he had anticipated and had taken far longer than expected. He had been out of the city nearly a month. He tried to relax and wait for the sun to set so he could get back to his own territory. He would have to check in with Janette at the club during the next few nights. He didn't want another assignment right at the moment. He was weary of rescuing a few privileged individuals while so many continued to be doomed to a horrible fate. He didn't involve himself in sabotaging railroads or bridges, just tried to deny the death camps a few helpless people. He was discouraged by how little he was able to accomplish even with his vampiric powers.

Janette, on the other hand, gloried in blowing up bridges or troop transports. These were invaders in her homeland. Somewhere along the way she had acquired a measure of patriotism. Nicolas always suspected that it was not so much the invasion of her country as the invasion of her club that motivated her.

"Monsieur Chevalier." Nicolas jerked around to see the stocky parish priest descend the stairs, fastidiously lifting his cassock off the dusty steps. The man was bareheaded with a closely cropped fringe of graying hair around the base of his skull. He had even, soft features and large dark eyes. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, the priest paused.

"Mon pere," Nicolas answered, rising from his makeshift resting place in a dim corner of the cluttered storage area.

"Mademoiselle DouBravo has sent a messenger. She would like to see you this evening after dark at Le Corbeau." The priest squinted at his guest. To reassure his visitor, the priest continued, "The messenger had the proper passwords, and it was coded for an emergency situation."

"Merci, mon pere," Chevalier answered, smiling inwardly at the pseudonym that Janette had chosen for her work in the maquis.

"Is there anything I can get for you, my

son?" the priest questioned his guest. "Perhaps some wine or cheese. I don't have much, but what I have is yours."

"Non, mon pere. There is nothing I desire," Nicolas answered quite truthfully. He had fed the previous night from a lovely large horse. He had been able drink his fill of the rich blood because of the size of the animal. There wasn't much chance that his needs would have any effect on the descendant of the huge chargers that carried the medieval knights to war.

"Then I will leave you and attend to my flock. There will be a mass said at four this afternoon. You are welcome to attend."

Startled, Nicolas stammered out something to the effect that he was exhausted and had a trying night upcoming. Already his soul and mind were in torment in this place. He wasn't sure what would become of him if he was exposed to the Holy Eucharist at this time.

Nodding, the priest commented, "As you will, my son." He was resigned to the lack of spirituality shown by many of these young men in the maquis occasionally sheltered in his small church. The husky human turned to ascend the stairs again. He paused at the top and contemplated his guest. Then shaking his head, he went through the heavy oak door and shut it gently.

After the priest had disappeared into his church, Nicolas wondered what Janette could want that would be so urgent that she would send a messenger? Checking his internal clock, Nicolas noted that it would be a few hours before the sun set. He settled himself on a packing carton and wrapped up in his long coat. It was the best he could do for bedding. *Contrary to popular belief, vampires do not prefer stuffy, dirty crypts for their day's sleep*, Nicolas thought as he drifted into the twilight world of vampiric sleep. The dust in the air tickled his nostrils as he tried to doze away the daylight hours.

Eventually Nicolas' time sense told him that the sun was setting. He rose from his makeshift bed and shook off as much of the grime from his coat as he could. Then he made his way up to the top of the stairs and listened at the door. His keen senses could discern no strangers within the building. Gently opening the door, he peered around it. He noticed the room behind the chapel was empty so he walked to the back door that led to the rectory. As

he passed an open doorway, he could hear bustling in the chapel, and assumed it was the priest setting his altar to rights after mass. He didn't want to risk walking into *that* holy a place. He smiled grimly as he thought of the look on the priest's face if his guest were to go up in a puff of smoke in his chapel.

Once outside the stifling atmosphere of the church, his depression lightened. Glancing around the small ill-kept garden between the church and the rectory, he saw no one. Most honest Parisians were home after dark. It wasn't fear of his kind, but of the deadly mortals that occupied the city.

He slipped into the narrow alley beside the church and took to the air. Over the blacked-out city, he made excellent time to the side street that Le Corbeau faced. He settled quietly around the corner from the club. Le Corbeau was open, and from the number of customers entering and leaving, it was doing quite well for Mademoiselle DouBravo. Slipping to the side door, he pushed it open easily and went down the hall toward Janette's private quarters.

As he passed the men's lavatory, he was struck in the face with a foul-smelling liquid. "Garlic!" He tried to levitate away from the noxious substance, but was hit on the head and shoulders at the same time by heavy chains which propelled him to the hard wooden floor. Blinking rapidly, he nearly screamed as only darkness met his visual senses. The substance had affected him the same way as acid in the face would a human. He was in agony and *blind*! There was scuffling as he madly tried to squirm away from the heavy weighted chains. Again he was assaulted with the burning liquid; it splashed down the back of his neck, scalding his shoulders in lava. This time he identified it as garlic mixed with water, probably holy water since it seemed to melt his skin. The liquid fire felt as if it were melting his flesh like sand before the incoming tide.

Calloused hands made grabs for his flailing limbs. He was hampered by the chains which sapped his strength. Finally he felt a hand grasp his hair and pull his head up. Something hard was pressed to his lower sternum. It was wooden and pierced the skin deeply to rest against the tough vampiric muscle protecting the vulnerable heart area, setting another portion of his anatomy alight. Innumerable other hands were trying to still his struggles. There were grunts of mortal pain as his

fists and feet struck soft human flesh.

"Demon, surrender to your fate," was intoned from a distance. The wood was driven deeper into his flesh. The chains burned his flesh wherever they touched, and he writhed in their grasp. Probably some damned priest had blessed them.

"Now, demon, or whatever you are," a thickly accented voice rasped in his ear. "Cooperation will earn you less pain." The vampire quieted his frantic struggle. Thrashing limbs came to rest on the hardwood floor. The stave was pulled back at this silent acquiescence.

"We must prepare a stake for this creature." The voice came from behind him now. His imagination threw him momentarily into the past, seeing a young woman's torment at such a stake many centuries past. At that time he had recognized a soul at peace; a soul resigned to its fate. In the end she had been forced into women's clothing, which had looked grotesque in view of her shaved head. She had been convicted of heresy for nothing more than wearing men's clothing. The church, even in its modern incarnation, would condemn his kind much easier than the innocent, young peasant girl. He would never surrender willingly to that painful fate even to save his own immortal soul—if he had one, which he seriously doubted.

"No stake for now. When we have finished with it, you may have it for whatever rituals you deem necessary." This was the German-accented voice drawing the vampire's attention away from his past.

"Holy Mother Church dictates that you shalt not suffer a demon. Burning at the stake is the only answer for his kind," the priest continued. If he had dared move, Nicolas would have shook his head in wonder at the contrast between this man and his host of the daylight hours. This priest was in partnership with the Nazi regime while his host had been strongly enough opposed to assist the maquis.

"First, the Fuhrer will be satisfied regarding the nature of these things. I have my orders."

Hands were easing as Nicolas made no overt moves. Even in his blindness he could discern the different men in the room from the differing breathing patterns and slight rustling noises they made as they shifted positions uncomfortably. There was the one in authority who had held the stake to his chest, the priest, and five others. He could smell the rank odor of fear in the last ones; it seemed to

override the reek of the garlic in which he had been saturated. He relaxed his body even to slowing his breathing to almost nothing.

The many hands holding the chains began to slacken as the priest and the German continued to argue.

"You promised that the demon would be turned over to Mother Church for cleansing."

"And the Third Reich will do so when our scientists have finished studying it." Nicolas shuddered at the tone and implications behind it. He had some very vivid memories of another scientist who had started to help him find a cure then decided he would make an interesting laboratory subject to keep and study.

As the unseen hands loosened their grip even more, Nicolas made a lunge with fangs bared. Two of the assailants were knocked free of the chains, but the other three held on doggedly. Then Nicolas was sprayed again with a fiery liquid. Pure holy water this time, he estimated from the excruciating torment on his torso and face. Limply he dropped back to the parquet floor swathed in the chains.

"You fools!" snarled the authoritarian voice. "Get that cage in here."

Nicolas began to feel increasingly weak as he heard rattling and clanging. There was a loud thud as something very heavy hit the floor near his head. His agony would be relieved momentarily as he deliberately gave his consciousness permission to flee, thus permitting his body to concentrate on healing. He felt no more.

* * *

Returning to consciousness, Nicolas noted that his body was healing itself at frantic pace. If he had not fed well the night before, this type of accelerated healing would have been impossible. He could feel the weeping blisters on his shoulders and face rapidly closing. The blindness was dissipating more slowly. But he could dimly see the outlines of his cell that was inside another cage, resting on the bed of a troop transport. The canvas sides and top were pulled tightly closed. He was able to distinguish all this only faintly since his normal night vision had not recovered completely, but he was no longer entirely dependent on his other senses.

The outer cage in which he was incarcerated could have been built to hold an elephant. Each bar

was a four-inch steel post. Even at his best strength he might have been hard pressed to break one at a weld. The lock on the cage which should have been its weakest point was forbidden him by the simplicity of having a cross welded to it.

He could hear the priest chanting from the front of the truck. He was facing the rear exit, leaning against one side of the interior metal crate. His hands had been pulled behind him and threaded through the bars then bound with what felt like beads, probably rosary beads. These were fragile bonds for anything but a vampire. His wrists ached and stung from long contact with the strong religious artifact. Their efficacy was enhanced by the fact that they had been blessed by a true believer. The priest behind him obviously had strong religious convictions—no matter that he was coincidentally serving a regime that the rest of the world would condemn when it found out what Nicolas knew. Because of his body's regenerative process, Nicolas hadn't the strength at the moment to combat such a belief; consequently, the flimsy beads held him with ease.

During the seemingly endless journey, Nicolas had time to reflect on how his enemies had gained this information about him. He wouldn't let himself think that the knowledge had come from Janette or of the manner in which it had been acquired. The other source was LaCroix, but in all the long centuries of their association, Nicolas had never known LaCroix to betray him to others. Castigate Nicolas himself, certainly. But it wasn't his style to abandon his ungrateful child to the retribution of strangers. No, he didn't think this predicament was of LaCroix's making, and he hoped not of Janette's. All he could be sure of at this point was that the informant had given deadly accurate intelligence.

After long hours of travel, the truck jerked to a stop, and the rattle of a gate opening was audible. With its motor growling, the truck lurched forward then turned up a long incline on a gravel road. The tires whispered on another paved section of road for a few miles then slowed and made a turn. After the truck ground to a halt and the engine was killed, the canvas was unlaced and the tailgate dropped down. A spotlight nearly blinded Nicolas with his precariously healing vision. As his sight continued to clear, Nicolas saw the priest being helped from the truck. Pointing at him in his cage were at least a

half dozen soldiers holding crossbows which were loaded with heavy wooden arrows. Yes, his enemies had done their homework well.

Cautiously, three uniformed figures materialized out of the glare. They affixed heavy chains to loops at the bottom of the outer cage. Six more men came into his range of vision carrying a heavy metal ramp which slid into slots at the bottom of the truck bed. Then the uneven rumble of a tractor motor shattered the stillness of the night. After it was backed into place, the weighty chains were attached to the hitch at its rear. The tractor's motor roared just before the chains snapped taut. The vehicle plunged forward, yanking the cage down the ramp to the pavement. Nicolas was flung forward and the rosary beads parted with the impact. The fall might have stunned a human, but the vampire only snarled and leaped at the cage door hoping that the drop had weakened some portion of the metal crates. They were more sturdily built than that and his efforts were an exercise in futility. In the background the continuous chanting of the priest was getting on his nerves. He suspected that if he were mortal it would have still bothered him. It was not the beautiful Gregorian chants he remembered from his childhood, but a dull monotone that grated on his mind.

He was distracted from the priest by the appearance of a German officer, probably the authoritarian voice from the club. Now through the gleam of the spotlights, he began to get a look at his opponent. The man was of average height and weight, but in the artificial glow, his coloring was nondescript. There was nothing that set him apart from his fellow humans except the black uniform with the lightning bolts on the collar. Those pips marked him as an especially dangerous person. Strutting back and forth in front of the cage, he occasionally flicked a short crop against his thigh. This affectation did not bother Nicolas at all—he was only concerned with escape from the clutches of this man.

"Demon, what do you call yourself?" the SS officer asked in a conversational tone.

Nicolas disdained to answer. His fangs and eyes had returned to their mortal camouflage. He simply stood in the cage, stared at nothing just over the officer's head and waited for the Nazi's next move. He was resisting in the only way left to him, passively. He vowed not to speak or inform on his

companions in the maquis.

Coming closer to his prisoner, the German studied the healing face with its clean-cut features. He saw wavy blond hair still tousled and damp from the water and garlic oil. He grimaced from the strong odor emanating from the human-looking creature.

The vampire kept its features unmoving but alert. Dissatisfied with the lack of response, the officer turned away from his victim and nodded toward the priest who came forward chanting louder and now rocking an incense burner toward the cage.

The danger of the action was not at once apparent until the incense began searing the vampire's lungs. Nicolas stopped breathing at once, but the damage had been done. The holy incense was within his body where it nearly stopped the slow beat of his heart. He collapsed to the floor of the cage. It was that simple to incapacitate him with the right weapons. His vulnerability to these ancient tools of the Inquisition terrified him. Once more he had to suspend consciousness to allow his body time to heal. Whether he would wake up again was only speculation, but he believed that he would. There had been so much effort made to take him alive when killing him would have been a much simpler task.

* * *

Chateau d'Argenlac

After meeting Nicolas in Paris a few months ago, LaCroix had cut his ties to the Gestapo. It had been an interesting diversion at the time, but he had grown bored with the situation and the fools that had run the interrogation unit. It was maddening to be at the beck and call of those stupid mortals. He had quietly left Paris and spent his time at Chateau d'Argenlac. The house itself was even older than any of the nearby residents thought; it was built on the site of an old Roman villa that LaCroix had occupied in various guises over the centuries. On this ancient estate there were simpler pastimes, but amusing just the same.

He kept track of the adventures of Janette and Nicolas. Their newly found patriotism was a favorite distraction. Janette's childish delight in blowing up trains or feeding on the invading troops was a vicarious pleasure to be savored.

However, Nicolas had cut himself off

entirely or as much as was possible with a bond of blood between them. He received few impressions or emotions from his favorite child. He could possibly force a link if he wanted to make the effort, but he didn't want to.

After an especially satisfying hunt many miles from his property, LaCroix rested in the secluded chateau. Lately he had hunted the invaders himself, always making sure his kills were far from the village that owed traditional fealty to his estate. This night he had killed one of the hated SS troopers. It had not been easy to lure one of the sentries into the forest and finally terrify it into a kill worth the taking.

Reclining back in a leather chair, he basked in the light of the full moon and did not notice the figure that made its way across his neatly kept lawn. Then the impact of another vampiric presence impinged on his consciousness as the person arrived on the second floor balcony. Briskly he rose from his chair and walked out to greet Janette as she came closer. Mentally he congratulated her on her stealth. Perhaps all her time spent with the rabble wasn't going to waste.

"Ah, Janette, it has been too long. Have you decided to give up this foolishness of helping fight a human war? Human wars aren't for our involvement, only our pleasure. There are always the leavings of human wars for us to feast upon." The elder vampire leaned forward to plant a gentle kiss on the perfect forehead. Still gently holding her, he pulled back to observe his loyal daughter's disheveled appearance. Her heavy mane of raven hair was pulled into a careless, unkempt knot. She wore wrinkled men's clothing, nothing he would ever have imagined she would do. Smiling to himself, he remembered many hunts when she had inappropriately wandered the woods in her finery. This was a different Janette than he would have expected.

Shrugging free of LaCroix's hands, Janette shook loose her dark mass of hair from its confining pins. Running her hands through the tumbled mass, she thought of what she had to tell LaCroix.

"Nicolas is missing," she said quietly then froze like a deer caught in the head-lights of an approaching vehicle. She waited for his reaction uneasily.

"When isn't the young fool going off searching for his cure?" LaCroix snarled, returning

to his chair in disgust. This wasn't going to be as interesting an interview as he had hoped.

"I think it's different this time," Janette hesitated. She turned and paced back toward the stone railing outside the open glass-doors. "On his last mission for the maquis, I know he returned to Paris or at least very near Paris. One of my contacts said he spent the day he returned in the basement of Saint Anne's."

"Bah, spending the day in church could have been Nicolas' undoing." LaCroix turned his head away, muttering, "Young fool."

"Non, the priest said he left as soon as the sun was down."

"Then he's off somewhere pursuing whatever he thinks might bring about his miraculous cure."

"Non, the priest said he left to meet me. I was supposed to have sent a messenger that said I needed him immediately." Janette turned back to her mentor. "I didn't send that messenger. I haven't been back to Le Corbeau for weeks. Nicolas wouldn't know that as he was in Germany for nearly a month. Someone was to contact him at his normal resting place. In fact, Michelle had been there for two days—ever since we had gotten word that he was coming out of Germany. He didn't stop at his place, but went directly to the club. He must have been given the right codes for an emergency situation."

LaCroix rose from his comfortable, leather chair and walked toward her. "Tell me the rest of it. There's something you aren't telling me." His face was hard, and his eyes were glittering nearly in transformation.

"One of the young ones disappeared a few weeks ago and hasn't been heard of since. His master can't locate his mind, but they were never close. You know how careless Sebastien has always been with his 'get.'" She worried her hair again. "We assumed the fledgling left the area or was killed accidentally. Now I just don't know...."

"Then you think Nicolas would return to Le Corbeau to find you?"

"Mais oui. Neither he nor the priest knew that we had changed our base of operations. The priest wouldn't be told in any case. He was simply running a safe-house for our agents. Best he didn't know too much. But this time perhaps he didn't know enough." Janette reached into a pocket of her uncharacteristically mannish coat and pulled out

cigarettes and a lighter. Hurriedly she lit the cigarette and drew deeply on it, blowing smoke over the edge of the railing. She paced back and forth. "Is there anything you can do?"

"Perhaps I could force a contact with his mind if I wanted to, but at the moment I see no need to. Let our young friend stew in his own juices for a while." LaCroix smiled thinly and walked back into his sitting room. "Come, my dear, let's have some refreshment and perhaps you can convince me of a good reason to rush to his rescue—that is, if he really needs one."

Janette shook her head and walked back across the veranda, "Non, I must get back to base before daylight." She nearly sobbed as she took to the air and disappeared.

LaCroix smiled slightly and sauntered in through the wide french doors that were open out to the veranda. He paused, then turned to his wine cabinet. Lifting out a long-necked bottle, he reached for a crystal goblet and poured in a healthy measure of his own private stock. Janette wasn't the only one that enjoyed a few of the finer things of life. Perhaps this would be an opportunity to return Nicolas to his nest. His child had fled him before and had returned when he had gotten his fill of dealing with mortals and their deceptions. Yes, he would give Nicolas time to remember how badly he needed his mentor.

* * *

It was seemingly hours before the next time Nicolas regained consciousness. The first thing he noticed was that only his trousers remained of his clothes. Then the ache from his arms called attention to the fact that he was lying on a cold metal table with his arms drawn up over his head. The ache from that region was not from the position, but the weighted metal cuffs that held his wrists in place. Once more he realized that he was in the grasp of something with religious significance. Probably the shackles had been blessed by the traitorous priest. His internal clock told him that the sun would drop below the horizon soon and all his well-honed instincts hammered at him to flee; in a human it might have been described as an adrenalin surge. He wasn't sure what it could be called in a vampire. He didn't care—he literally wanted to fly away. However, the chains holding his limbs were

doing an effective job of immobilizing him.

Warily he opened his eyes to mere slits. There was an astoundingly bright light directly over where he lay. Behind his head, he identified the chanting of the Nazi priest still mumbling his incessant prayers for Nicolas' destruction.

Through his narrow line of vision he could see two men talking. With an effort, he tuned out the chanting and listened to the two figures. One of the men wore a wrinkled white lab coat and the other was the SS officer from the night before. Ignoring his various aches and pains, he concentrated on hearing what was being discussed.

"Don't let this one get too strong. You know after our other specimen killed that gypsy, it was strong enough to break your restraints. We still don't know if it got back to any of its kind," the uniformed figure spoke intensely to the one in the white lab coat. "I can't afford to lose another one."

"I really don't think it went very far," the scientist answered softly and perhaps with a tinge of regret. From his accented German, Nicolas could discern he was probably French. "I kept some samples of its blood and tissue." He turned to the refrigerator beside a door. He opened the door and took out a petri dish. "Come over here and watch this, Major Peiper."

Nicolas watched as the scientist opened the latches of the heavy steel door letting in the waning daylight. Unconsciously he flinched, but he forced himself to observe what the scientist was showing the other man. In the dying rays of the sun, the contents of the petri dish began to smoke then flared into flames.

"Our first guest escaped during the day if you remember," the scientist commented quietly to his companion.

"Interesting. Then your theory is that it couldn't have gone back to Paris, Dr. Marchand?" the German officer murmured.

"Or anywhere else."

"That is probably why our guard dogs found a few scraps of clothes, but no body." The uniformed figure turned to look speculatively at the still form on the table. Turning back to the other man, he said, "Then you think the legends are true then that vampires burn up in the sunlight."

"I wonder if this one is so handicapped," the scientist murmured as he led the officer back toward the gurney. He observed it carefully as the soldier

spoke to him.

"Use all the samples you want of its blood and tissue, but don't kill it. Just keep it under control." The major drew the attention of his companion back to him.

"I won't forget. The last one cost me two lab assistants. One was bled dry and the other had a broken neck." The scientist turned his attention back to Nicolas lying quite still on the steel table. "These restraints are much heavier than the last set." He looked again closely at their prisoner. "I think our latest guest is awake." Dr. Marchand walked toward the table and reached into his pocket. He brought out a small silver cross which he placed directly in front of Nicolas' face. The vampire flinched and turned his head away. Smiling and dropping the cross into his coat pocket, he looked toward the German officer who had come to stand beside the table. Major Peiper nodded his comprehension.

"This one has fantastic healing powers. Watch this," Dr. Marchand commented casually as he took a scalpel from his lab coat. With an economic movement, he sliced a long deep cut along Nicolas' ribcage. The vampire gasped as the blade cut nearly to the bone. In his weakened condition, the effort of healing was excruciating, and Nicolas panted with the effort not to scream out his agony. He controlled the urge, trying to cover his weakness before the mortals intently scrutinizing him.

"Notice there is little or no bleeding. And what blood escapes the wound is drawn back as the wound completely seals itself." The two watched, fascinated for a few minutes as the wound healed itself to a red welt that quickly began to fade. "I think the other vampire was telling the truth when it said it was young and didn't have all its powers." The clinical perspective of the scientist accompanied by the cold-blooded attitude of the German was frightening. Nicolas realized that he wasn't anything more than an interesting experiment to one and something less than human to the other.

"It did tell us that this one and the female who ran Le Corbeau were much older. Too bad we haven't found that woman. It would be interesting to see them interact together, that is after you've finished your investigations." Silently Nicolas sighed in relief to find out that Janette had been spared anything like this.

"I think keeping one in the lab is dangerous

enough even with all the precautions we've taken this time," the scientist answered, turning away from the gurney on which Nicolas rested uneasily. "However it's fascinating to see what tolerance these creatures have."

"Just don't kill it or let it get away," the officer commented, "before you have figured out how these creatures are made and how we may exploit them. Remember, you have a great deal to lose." The rumpled scientist seemed to shrink from the Nazi officer. Major Peiper continued speaking without seeming to notice the effect his words had on the man he was talking to. "I don't think it would be much help to have soldiers who can't fight during the day; but to have an army with that healing ability and invulnerability to bullets would be a great asset to the Third Reich."

"Yes, Herr Major, I can see the military possibilities are endless even if the men could only fight at night," the scientist spoke with undisguised loathing. Again Major Peiper didn't seem to notice or care.

"If that is the only way to achieve such abilities, I will have to speak to my superiors before trying anything with any of the soldiers." The major turned to look at the vampire on the gurney. "However, see what you can accomplish. You will have as many experimental prisoners as you need. Just tell the sergeant in charge to get more from one of the camps when you run out." The major paused and reached to the counter for his cap. "I need to go to Berlin tonight, but I should be back in three or four days."

"I beg your pardon, Major Peiper, but may I ask that the priest be sent away?" the doctor asked. "I find his chanting a distraction to my research and a disturbance to my assistants."

"Certainly, Doctor; he's served his purpose, I think. We only needed him to control the beast until we had him firmly incarcerated here in your laboratory." The major left and took the bothersome priest with him. Nicolas was relieved to see him go; the golden silence was something to be thankful for at a moment when there was very little to be thankful for in his present existence.

* * *

The next few days were a jumble of pain and disorientation for Nicolas. He spent many days in

the cage and nights painfully on the table. On several occasions when neither the threats of wooden stakes nor holy water could budge him from his corner of the cage, the scientist would allow him a pint of stale human blood. He always drained the glass container quickly and looked for more. This deliberate near starvation was taking its toll on his physical abilities.

After being incarcerated for nearly two weeks, Nicolas could understand why the young vampire escaped, knowing he would die in the sunlight. He found he was waiting for a similar opportunity, but his jailers watched him constantly. The relief of suicide was not going to be his.

As time slowly passed Nicolas found himself left alone in his cage more often. There were periods when he was left alone in his cell for hours. It gave him time to explore the steel bars. During one of his searches he found one bar that seemed to be weaker than the rest. After that, whenever he could, he worked on the bar. It may have been his imagination, but the post holding the hinges seemed to be gradually loosening at the weld near the top. He worried it off and on over the blurred passage of days that followed. It was probably a futile effort, but it gave him something to keep his mind occupied. He was in danger of giving in to the questioning. The scientist had evolved a method of asking a crucial question regarding his nature then, if not answered, testing his theory, usually with painful results for Nicolas.

* * *

One day during a particularly painful experiment involving gradual exposure to the sun, Nicolas felt himself beginning to lose control. He knew that had been a danger from the very beginning.

His gurney had been placed near toward one of the windows of the laboratory that afternoon. The sun shone in the window brightly. His hands and wrists were exposed first; then other parts of his body. He screamed for the first time as the sun's deadly rays enveloped his face. Then Nicolas' own private Mr. Hyde was completely free. His brain screamed its outrage at the abuse of his body. He released his conscious control to the animal that always hovered at the edge of his mind. It raged at the restraints and managed to snap two of the steel

bands imprisoning his arms and chest.

One keeper who got within the range of his free hand was dead before anyone realized his peril. However, a splash of holy water in the vampire's face quelled his struggles long enough for the heavy restraints to be replaced. Then the gurney was brought back into the dimmer light in the center of the room.

With the assistance of four men, the scientist arranged more shackles on his subject. Now there were two sturdy cuffs on each of his arms. Later the experiment in the sunlight was continued until the victim passed out with deep burns, and the little clothing he wore was heavily scorched. Then Nicolas was taken back to his cage and incarcerated once more to heal through the remaining daylight hours. This time it would take more than a pint of blood and longer than a day to accomplish the healing.

After the sun had set the doctor visited the nearly comatose victim in his cell and brought three vials of blood. Nicolas awoke feeling the proximity of his enemy and watched from slitted eyes as the glass bottles were shoved between the bars. He finally reached for one and pulled the cork. He emptied the container rapidly then grabbed up the others and finished them off without thought.

Slumping against the bars of the cell, the vampire allowed his hopelessness to surface. Nicolas rested his head on his arms, wondering when this purgatory would end. His faith in God had been shaken many times, but now he simply couldn't understand any god allowing this agony visited on anything, even one as patently evil as himself.

The effort it took to work on the bar holding the hinge was more than he could manage. He had no tools but his hands. He couldn't use the glass bottles since the guards would come for them soon. Forcing himself up, he leaned against the door and used his full weight and waning strength against the bar. It slipped a little and he wiggled the bar back and forth in its socket. He kept this up until he heard steps in the corridor outside the storeroom that housed his cage. Then he slid down to the floor. He continued to feign weakness, hoping that some day, sometime, the doctor or his assistants would let their guard slip.

The guards appeared with their crossbows and holy water. With undisguised dread Nicolas moved to the back of the barred cell. Surrounding

the cage, the three men gestured for Nicolas to submit to the manacles and leave the relative peace of his cell. Knowing he had no choice, he acquiesced.

* * *

Chateau d'Argenlac

That same day in his peaceful bed, Lucien LaCroix shrieked as the blazing sun ignited his skin. He could feel the heat well up through his entire being. His tormentors were just out of reach of his grasping hands. He threw himself at the ghostly figures and came abruptly awake as he fell off the edge of the world—or so it seemed.

Panting at his exertions, LaCroix levitated from the floor where he had landed, his mind panicking at the vision of the blinding sun that he hadn't seen in nearly two thousand years. He was startled to find that the blackout curtains were snugly fitted to the windows of the spacious bedroom in the chateau. He had fallen on the plush Persian carpet beside the four poster bed. He glanced around at the quiet paintings that lined the walls. The fireplace was cold and the room empty. The contrast between the blistering memories of his dream and the chilly atmosphere of the room caused an involuntary shiver up his spine.

Whatever had disturbed his rest was not in this room. He paced as he let his mind roam free of his body. The torture he had perceived was not his own, although it was real enough for someone. The only person to whom he was susceptible in this manner was Nicolas. LaCroix always knew when his young protege was in pain. He had retained this much of the master/slave bond which he had used to enhanced his control of this troublesome yet fascinating creature centuries ago. However, the pain that awakened him this day was excruciating in the extreme.

His first emotion was exasperation. What had the young fool gotten himself involved in this time? Then—surely he wasn't contemplating suicide? No, that wasn't the impression he had gotten from the brief contact. Nicolas wasn't in the sunlight at his own behest. Something or someone had forced him into the light. LaCroix unfurled his vampiric tie to Nicolas. He could feel Nicolas at the very edges of his range. There was no direction that he could discern. Nevertheless, he couldn't ignore the implications of the contact.

Janette did say that he was missing from the underground group. Was it possible that it was as she had thought—that Nicolas had walked into a trap which was sprung for a vampire? With this thought uppermost in his mind, he knew he would have to do something, no matter who was in danger. Their whole community was at risk if the German regime or any mortal group had knowledge of their kind and how to disable them. It seemed obvious from Nicolas' pain and helplessness that someone somewhere had that kind of knowledge.

Once more he scanned the ether for contact with Nicolas. This time there were only faint traces on the edges of his consciousness. He would probably have to wait for Nicolas to be tortured again to get some sort of directional beacon.

So LaCroix waited. The contact weakened then was gone. He was left with a hazy impression of the direction from which it came. But he needed more information before he could mount a rescue. Once he had pinpointed the location, he could get there in a matter of minutes. Vampires of his age and strength could almost travel at the speed of light if it were necessary.

* * *

Once more Nicolas was strapped to the examining table under the bright lights, feeling the prick of a needle in his arm as the nearly bald scientist once more drew his blood.

There was a click as the door outside of Nicolas' field of vision opened. The scientist raised his head and spoke, "Aaah, Major Peiper, I am making some progress at finding out the physical attributes of this disease, but am no closer to the reason for it."

"What have you found out about how it is spread?" the major asked, walking around the table and looking coldly at the semi-nude figure resting there.

"Oui, certainment. It is spread by an exchange of blood from the infected vampire to the healthy human. This contaminated blood must mix with normal blood within the environment of the human body. Change does not seem to begin until the person is dead or very near death. The name our ancestors gave these creatures is quite appropriate," the man paused as he walked around the room,

picking up various test tubes and other common pieces of laboratory equipment. Taking a deep breath he continued his report, "But the changes in the human body are remarkable once the infection becomes active. Complete transformation is effected in about 24 hours." The man paused and brushed his hands down his rumpled white lab coat.

The scientist was becoming quite caught up in his work. The whole area of his research was terribly fascinating. Early in the project, he had participated only because of threats to his family. Now he was completely enthralled by his work. Any thoughts about the comfort of the subject of his investigations was lost in the haze of finding out all he could about this new disease.

Major Peiper walked around the room slapping his riding crop against his thigh in an unconscious movement. "Has he told you anything about where he comes from and how many others of his kind there are?"

"Uh... no, it doesn't speak. One might think it was mute, but I am sure it just has a great deal more restraint as well as much higher resistance to such things as sunlight. It's enormously strong. I've had to double the strength of the fetters on this table. It nearly managed to get free two days ago. It's always testing the bonds so I've not fed it very well. That seems to be the only control I am sure of."

The major nodded then said, "I will need a written report the next time I am back from Berlin. Be sure to have it ready. I am not ready to listen to your excuses again."

Dr. Marchand readily agreed to the major's instructions and watched the German major go out to his waiting car. He carefully put his notes in the drawers of his desk then ordered Nicolas to be returned to his cell.

* * *

It was a few days later when Nicolas was once more shoved from his cell into the laboratory. He was weak from lack of blood so it took only two hefty guards to prod him from his refuge to the examining table. He resisted ineffectually being strapped down, but the burly men effectively lifted him to the table. As usual his arms were stretched over his head and slapped into two pairs of thick steel cuffs on each wrist. His body and legs were

treated in a similar fashion.

"It's ready, Herr Doctor," one of the guards said.

"Merci. I'll be right there," answered Dr. Marchand from the other room.

Only moments later when the scientist appeared accompanied by the German major, carrying a bundle of notebooks.

"The principal handicap of these so-called vampires is their sensitivity to sunlight," the doctor commented as he continued to walk toward the creature strapped to the metal table.

"Yes, that is a problem," the officer answered, following the doctor.

"I am continuing to expose this one in hopes that his tolerance can be built up. Each day the session is a little longer, but you can see it is getting weaker and weaker. I'm not sure how long it will survive."

"How many prisoners have you infected with the disease?"

"Only one which we had to kill within a few days. It went insane. I'm not sure why. If this one would only talk! I'm sure it could give us a lot of answers if it would speak."

"Then make it talk," the major snapped.

"How do you make something like that talk? We're effectively torturing it daily, and it never says a word except blasphemy in many different languages."

"Offer it something it needs," the major said, turning to look at the man-like form on the table. "You say the only way you can keep it weak enough to remain manageable is not to give it much nourishment. Well, then offer to feed it if it will answer questions."

"I tried that yesterday. It now won't eat anything. I'm beginning to wonder if it has decided to commit suicide. I think it may just manage that if I can't find a way to force-feed it."

Nicolas was listening with dismay to this discussion. He had thought, if nothing else, he could avoid further torment by slipping into vampire hibernation—a state that his people could make use of if accidentally buried or confined without food.

"No, I won't have it," the major shouted as he began pacing the room and looking at the vampire nearly unconscious on the table. "Have you thought of a transfusion?"

"A transfusion... no, I just assumed that since it drank the blood... hmmm... perhaps... it won't hurt to try, I suppose." The scientist began hurrying around the room and opening cabinets. Finally he came forward with tubes, bottles, and a needle.

The German officer watched as he made his way toward the figure on the table. He wrapped Nicolas' thin upper arm with a rubber strap and tightened it. Then he began probing near the elbow for a vein. He didn't have much luck. Stepping back in disgust, he motioned the two guards forward.

"Release its right arm."

The guards moved to comply just as Peiper stepped forward. "I think we'd better take some precautions." There was something about the leashed strength in the taut body and glitter in the blue eyes that alerted the major.

"Oui, you might be right." He motioned to the guards, and continued, "Take him to his cell." The guards manhandled the weak vampire from the table and literally dragged him to the cell. It took two to carry him and one followed with the crossbows.

Nicolas wasn't as weak as he appeared. He had some vague hope that the security would relax if he allowed them their experiments without rebellion. He had not managed to escape through violence, but perhaps he could with cunning. Now, those vague hopes were rising. Perhaps the transfusion would strengthen him and he might get a chance to escape; if not, a little revenge on his tormentors would give him some satisfaction. And perhaps he could force them to kill him in the process.

Once in his cell, Nicolas allowed himself to slump to the floor. He lay in his fetters without moving. The doctor and two of his rough assistants lifted the vampire to the cot in the corner and began once more to find a place to put the needle. Eventually, the doctor managed to insert his needle into the large vein in the vampire's arm. Slowly, very slowly he was given three pints of blood. It was the most Nicolas had been allowed since the experiment with full noon-time sun which had come close to killing him. Nicolas relaxed and let his body absorb the fuel it needed desperately. Finally the scientist began gathering up his implements to leave the cell. This time Nicolas dropped his

barriers deliberately and let his beast rage free.

Slamming the doctor against one wall of the cell, he heard the man's skull crack with satisfaction then turned his attention to the other two humans. With fangs bared, he moved with blinding speed to crush the larynx of a guard reaching for his awkward crossbow which was made even more unwieldy because of the cramped conditions of the cell. The remaining guard inside the cage fired one bolt at the vampire which caught Nicolas in the upper arm. He was trying to get out of the barred enclosure when Nicolas caught him from behind. Before he could do more than yell once, he was dead with a broken spine.

The guard who had stayed outside the cell pulled the trigger on his bow. Nicolas was slammed against the bars of the cage as the arrow pierced him in the side. He reached for the bolt and tugged. It was embedded deeply in his flesh and resisted being removed. As he heard the crossbow being cocked again, he ignored the pain from the wooden bolt and lunged for the door. As the door clanged discordantly against the wall, the guard hurriedly let fly another arrow. It found purchase in Nicolas' thigh just as he grabbed the weapon from the hapless guard. Throwing the weapon across the narrow room, the vampire took the human by the arm and rammed him into the bars of his recent cell. The man's skull split with a sickening crunch.

Panting, Nicolas surveyed the mayhem he had created with some satisfaction. He had no guilt about these deaths—these things were less human than he. Slipping out of his cell, he walked down the hall, feeling the strength flowing to his muscles. It was still full dark so he might have some chance of winning free. Soon he would be free in some manner, of that he was sure.

* * *

Having overheard the strangled scream from the converted storeroom, Major Peiper had rushed back to witness the deaths of the last two guards. He was stunned at the utter carnage. Turning down the hall, he rushed out the back door of the laboratory to summon help. In his complete horror, he forgot the strengths and immunities of vampires. He completely overlooked the fact that firearms were useless against the menace in the laboratory. Racing

toward the guard barracks, he shouted out orders to all who responded to his yells. Most were not dressed and were groggy from sleep. However, streaming out from behind the main house behind the cottage three troopers emerged carrying machine guns. Six more came from the front guard post. Gesturing toward the building behind him, the major urged the men forward.

He stood back, sending the armed men in ahead of him. The automatic weapons rattled as the major listened in satisfaction. Then gradually the weapons were quieted...too quiet...Major Peiper peered in through the windows of the laboratory. What he saw in the converted living quarters would haunt him the rest of his days. All the guards were sprawled on the floor with their weapons discarded. Some of the rifles had barrels bent at unnatural angles, but it wasn't any of this that appalled the battle-hardened major. It was the thing, snarling and pacing the floor.

Horried by the butchery and by the deadly monster in the cottage, Peiper started to flee toward the main house only to be met with gunfire coming from that area. He ran to his staff car, and not waiting for his driver, maneuvered it toward the gate on the side of the compound opposite from the firing.

It was a measure of his fear that without a second thought he ran down the guard from that gate when he attempted to stop him. He knew it was unthinkable that an SS major would leave the scene of an attack by the riffraff from the underground, but he couldn't stop himself.

It was only miles down the road when he noticed that the notebooks given him by Dr. Marchand were tucked into his uniform blouse. Peiper thought momentarily of disposing of the evidence of his cowardice, but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. The research these notebooks represented was simply too valuable.

Thinking it over as he drove, he decided he would just arrive at the lab a day too late. Perhaps he could contrive some way to find the notebooks in the wreckage. He would dutifully assist in the investigation of the attack. All of the devastation probably could be blamed on the maquis.

Perhaps someday he might turn them over to the Reich. Or he might find some other use for them....

He slowed the car to a reasonable speed then drove at a more sane pace to the nearby village. He would rent a room and a woman for the night and arrive at the compound tomorrow. The woman would be his excuse for arriving a day late. He would be reprimanded for whoring, but not disciplined as he would be if they knew about his fleeing the horrifying scene.

* * *

Nicolas entered the lab just as the guards ordered there by Major Peiper were coming through the outside door. The machine guns chattered a deadly hail of lead... fatal to mortal flesh, but scarcely noticeable to his undying vampire flesh. But the peppering of the lead pellets served to infuriate the frantic vampire. With little thought to fragile human bones or the environment, Nicolas literally tore both asunder. The fiend was once more in full control of his mind. It ripped furnishings to shreds. The surviving troopers fled the cottage, dropping their weapons in their haste. The enraged beast wreaked havoc on the room that had witnessed its torture. Stopping occasionally to tug on one arrow or the other, the inhuman creature, crazed out of control, took vengeance on cabinets and glassware.

Then there was a squeak of fright from the door behind the irate vampire. Nicolas turned to see a woman scurry down the hall. He flew after her, making a frenzied grab for her just as she entered her closet-like office. In his haste, he missed her shoulder and clamped down on the back of her neck, not really noticing that her vulnerable spine shattered in his grasp. Startled, the Nicolas portion of the duo watched her slump to the floor. Then as comprehension set in, he sank down beside her as his nemesis receded. Nicolas looked around the hall and back into the abattoir that he had made of the laboratory and wondered if his own freedom was worth it. With that despairing thought, his dark alter-ego took over once more and the part of the vampire that was Nicolas ceased to care.

* * *

Chateau d'Argenlac

In his isolated villa, Lucien LaCroix paced

his quarters, waiting. There was little he could do but wait. It had been days since he'd had the alarming contact with Nicolas. Since those first distressing images of the sun, he had been alert to any tickle at the back of his mind that could be Nicolas. He had been rewarded a number of times, but he was still waiting for a good directional link.

His wayward protege had a nasty habit of getting himself into some very tight spots; this seemed like another one. He stopped walking long enough to pour himself another glass of his private stock of blood and wine.

Just as these thoughts were occurring, LaCroix was hit with a blinding flash of rage that caused him to drop his wine glass and snarl at an empty room. Then as before, he knew it was an inadvertent connection with Nicolas. Opening himself fully to the rage and pain, LaCroix knew that Nicolas was fighting his captors desperately. And the demon that hovered inside all vampires, which Nicolas feared so much, was taking over. In his fury Nicolas had no mental barriers and through all the pain, LaCroix was finally able to get a fix on him. Yes, suddenly he had a direction and enough of a tie to locate his lost changeling.

Taking to the air directly from his own balcony was foolhardy, but LaCroix didn't have time to be discreet. Summoning his immense strength, he forced himself to blinding speed; he hadn't done it in decades so the concentration needed was massive. The sensation was a blinding blur, disorienting him momentarily until he could focus on the bond with Nicolas.

In real time it took only a few minutes to cover the hundred or so kilometers to another isolated country estate. Swooping down into the woods near a high fence that surrounded the compound, he strained his enhanced senses outward. It was long moments before he found the familiar, beloved aura he was seeking. Then his hypersensitive ears heard the rattle of machine gunfire. His mind filled with an insane rage—it had to be Nicolas that was being fired upon! It didn't matter that Nicolas was invulnerable to the lead projectiles, it was the fact that someone—any human—was attempting to kill *his* Nicolas.

Throwing caution to the wind, he vaulted the woven wire fence that glinted with sharp spikes of barbed wire on the top. Following the sounds and

his own intuition, he soon arrived at a small cottage about two hundred yards from the main buildings. There was another rattle of gunfire from beyond the chateau just as he was about to burst through the door. Everything became tinged with red as he smashed the door to toothpicks. In passing, his agitated brain noticed the room had once been a laboratory of some sort. Now it was just so much debris. Glass crunched under his feet as he stepped over bent metal tables and chairs. Cabinets were pulling their screws from the plaster on the walls. Almost in passing, he noted the uniformed bodies on the floor. Some were nearly dismembered. Nothing less than they deserved, he was sure.

Pushing the fallen junk out of his way, he moved toward the open door then on down the hallway. There was a feminine scream and then silence. He entered what had to have once been a hallway leading to an office where file cabinets were askew with drawers gaping open. However, he didn't really notice anything other than the apparition that confronted him. It was a scarecrow figure with gleaming eyes and snarling teeth. There were splintered arrows protruding from various portions of its anatomy. With no sign of recognition, Nicolas leaped toward his ancient mentor.

In the space of a split second, LaCroix fathomed why Nicolas was so enraged that his sanity might be in danger. He was thin to the point of emaciation with weeping blisters from repeated exposure to the sun's deadly rays. He intercepted the skeleton-like figure and used his enormous strength to confine the flailing limbs of the enraged animal. Then as gently as possible, he struck a heavy blow to the side of its head, enforcing the impact with a mental command, a command that went back 800 years to a time when Nicolas had been his bondmate.

The weight in his arms slumped toward the floor as unconsciousness stilled the afflicted brain. LaCroix slid to the floor and held onto Nicolas as firmly and gently as he could. If he could have wept, he would have for the first time in nearly a millennium. Time drifted for him as he mourned his child because he was almost certain that the fine mind he had always admired was gone forever. The torture and final killing spree had left Nicolas insane or nearly so, he was sure. Insanity was always a fine line that his kind tread. The very nature of their

lives meant that only the strongest kept their unearthly instincts under control. In the last few years, Nicolas had come close to eradicating his own vampire nature. LaCroix had laughed at his efforts, but wasn't unappreciative of the control Nicolas was achieving at what was a relatively young age.

As he cradled the thin body in his lap, he pushed the wicked shafts through Nicolas' arm and leg then broke the jagged points off. Then he pulled the arrows back through the tunnel they had made in the pale flesh. Shifting on the glass strewn floor, not noticing as a few sharp shards pierced his own skin, he removed the one in Nicolas' torso in the same manner. It was more difficult and the younger vampire moaned at the further intrusion in his body.

Next he began imposing more of his formidable will on the damaged ego to suppress consciousness. Then he soothed the mind as he laid a strong command for his protege to rest and heal. Momentarily, as he was forced to relive the terror of capture and blindness, he was nearly swamped. Pulling back from Nicolas' mind, he allowed himself a few moments to rage at the suffering that had been endured. Nicolas had taken a much milder retaliation on those responsible than he would have. The humans involved were actually lucky to be dead. He cuddled the form in his lap. There was more tenderness than Nicolas or Janette would have believed possible.

How long the elder vampire sat in the debris on the floor of the wrecked cottage he would never know. Only when a gentle hand tapped him on the shoulder did he look up and into the face of his other child. It was a measure of his distraction that Janette and her companions had entered the same room with him and not noticed their activities until she touched him.

Janette was squatting beside him with an appalled expression as she observed the state of her brother and former lover. Only in passing did she notice the tender expression of her master. That Nicolas was not dead was apparent in the fact that he had not turned to ash. But the state of his tormented body revolted her—even considering her war-time experiences.

"Lucien, we must leave this place," she said softly. Behind her were two humans holding machine guns. They were hardened veterans who

were also shocked at the appearance of the comrade they had come to rescue.

"Janette, how do you come to be here?" LaCroix questioned harshly as he rose easily from the floor with his burden. Nicolas had lost so much weight that it was of little consequence for the older vampire to carry him like a babe.

"I began making enquiries as soon as I left you. We had infiltrated this facility a few weeks ago. The secretary with the broken neck in the back room was our agent. She finally was able to get out a report two nights ago."

"Why didn't you tell me? I could been here immediately."

"From our last interview, I assumed you wouldn't be interested," Janette said with cold reproach in her voice.

LaCroix began walking toward the doorway. "Never assume anything about me where Nicolas is concerned, my dear." LaCroix's voice would have frozen a tropical forest.

Janette gestured to her men to leave. "No matter what you think of me, we still have to leave this area immediately. I'm sure the radio operator got off a message." She brushed her hair from her eyes. "Where are you taking him?"

Turning to regard icily his other protege, he said, "Back to my chateau, where else?"

She nodded then spoke, "Will he be all right?"

"I don't know. I have never seen a living vampire this damaged. He may be completely insane. If that is the case, I will take care of the problem."

Janette watched her mentor walk toward the woods and the barbed wire fence. She didn't attempt to follow or call out to him. Eventually he would forgive her, she thought, if Nicolas survived. If Nicolas didn't, she might have to watch her back for the next hundred years or more.

Stopping before he was more than a few paces from Janette, LaCroix spoke harshly, "Fire this place. Make sure all records here are destroyed. I will inform the Enforcement Council of this mishap and your part in it."

Janette froze at the implications of his speech. Yes, all the records would have to be found and burned. LaCroix was right; but she was reasonably sure that some sort of records must had

been sent into Germany. She would have to make contact with London and see if something could be done from that end.

Calling to a small dark man named Marc, she gave explicit directions to set fire to the cottage and the chateau. She would remain behind to make sure that the Germans found nothing but ash.

Turning her attention to other matters, she gave Madeline and Andre orders to forward to the group about disbanding and reassembling later at their headquarters in this area. She looked back to where she had last seen LaCroix with his self imposed responsibility, but he had vanished.

Marc returned with a can of gasoline and she saw that other figures were running toward the mansion with more cans. Marc drew her attention once more as he raced through the doorway to the laboratory deliberately spilling the can he carried as he moved. He was long moments in the rear of the cottage before coming back minus the can. With her cigarette lighter, Janette lit a fragment of paper, gestured Marc backward then threw it into the cottage and moved away with vampiric swiftness. There was a whoosh as the gasoline ignited.

Standing well away from the roaring bonfire, Janette and Marc watched in silence. Finally the wiry man spoke, "A fitting tribute to Monique. I just wish the bastard that broke her neck was still in there."

Janette nodded, reasonably sure who it was had broken Monique's neck. However, Nicolas would never know who or what she was. He was going to be afflicted with enough guilt from this whole scenario as it was, if he survived intact.

* * *

Landing on the balcony of d'Argenlac, LaCroix took his still unconscious ward to his bedroom and began stripping him of what few clothes remained on his tormented body. Once he had settled Nicolas on his own bed, he went into his bathroom and ran the huge tub full of warm water, not hot, since he was sure that would be more painful than leaving Nicolas dirty. When the tub was to his satisfaction, he went back into his bedroom to find that his charge was awake and in full vampire mode. His eyes gleamed in the moonlight and his fangs were almost painfully

extended. As far as LaCroix could discern there was no intelligence behind the flashing eyes.

This was not an unexpected event, but Lucien had hoped to bathe Nicolas before he fed him. With the speed inherent in his species, LaCroix ripped off his shirt and flew to his weakened child who was trying to rise from the ruined bedspread. Landing in a kneeling position on the bed, LaCroix steadied Nicolas as he tried to make contact with the elder vampire's throat. While feigning off that attack with one hand, LaCroix directed the matted, greasy blond head toward his chest. With his other hand LaCroix scored his own chest with his nails. Nicolas immediately attached his fangs to the other's muscular pectorals.

LaCroix allowed Nicolas to feed for a long time, until he began to feel the effect of the drainage. Not ungently, he pushed the younger vampire back down to the bed and waited to see what result this would have.

Physically Nicolas began healing immediately. His master's blood was almost as powerful a tool for healing as human blood would have been. The weeping burns began to dry up and the welts started to shrink. There was a slightly pinkish color returning to Nicolas' countenance. But physical healing wasn't what was worrying LaCroix; what remained of the mind behind the blue eyes was the important thing.

Those blue eyes blinked once then again. There was recognition in them. LaCroix felt an immense measure of relief. His major worry had been that he would have to destroy this favorite of his creations.

"I might have known that you would be involved in this," Nicolas said bitterly, turning his head away from his once-mentor.

Stunned at the implications of that statement, LaCroix was momentarily speechless. After long moments of silence between the two ancient friends and enemies, he spoke. "My dear Nicolas, you might still be in that chamber of horrors or truly dead if I hadn't come to your rescue once more. A little gratitude would be more appropriate, if you please."

Looking around at his surroundings, Nicolas started to rise from the bed. "This is d'Argenlac. Is this where I've been all along?" Struggling to move away from LaCroix, Nicolas noticed his own

weakness. The blood singing in his veins wasn't enough to provide him with the strength to stand up, let alone fight LaCroix.

Stung even more, LaCroix rose from the bed and walked away. "Believe what you like, but I did once more come to your rescue. I *did* remove you from the clutches of those bastards." Then in a moment of truth, he continued, "Although, you were doing a reasonable job of rescuing yourself, I simply brought you here to recover."

Memory returned as Nicolas once more saw the carnage he had wrought in those last moments before all became dark. He remembered the young woman dying by his hand. The other deaths were dimmer and didn't trouble him as much. Her death might bother him for a long time. As far as he knew, she was probably innocent enough. Although, on the other hand, she might have approved of the whole thing.

Unless this was some elaborate trick of the Nazis, LaCroix may be telling the truth. In the depths of his own heart, he still couldn't quite imagine LaCroix allowing someone *else* to torture him. LaCroix had always rescued him from his follies in the past and it seemed had done so once more. He was too tired and sick to express much gratitude or continue the argument.

"I beg your pardon. I knew all along that it really wasn't your style. You would have been more subtle," Nicolas conceded, sinking back down on the bed.

LaCroix nodded sharply, curtly acknowledging Nicolas' apology.

"You may rest shortly, but first I would like to save as much of my bedding as possible," LaCroix quietly responded, reaching down to lift the wasted figure from the bed. "I prepared a bath, but it may be a bit more chilly than I had planned."

Nicolas nodded and nearly dropped off to sleep in the short distance to the bathroom. The sun was rising and a vampire did most of its healing during the daylight hours.

The bath wasn't as cold as LaCroix had imagined. The feeding and argument hadn't taken as long as he had thought. However, before he had Nicolas dry, the injured vampire was unconscious once more. This time, however, it was a normal vampiric rest, perhaps a little deeper than usual for one of Nicolas' age.

After stripping off the now foul bedspread, LaCroix wrapped Nicolas in a fluffy down comforter then slid in beside him. Nicolas muttered a few words and turned as if for solace to LaCroix. Reaching out with his arm, LaCroix gathered the slight form into his embrace. Nicolas snuggled closer and murmured unintelligibly into the bedding. With an overwhelming feeling of relief, LaCroix slid quickly into darkness for his own slumber. It had been stressful during the recent weeks. Now he that he had Nicolas safe, he could rest. No one would ever know that since that first agonizing contact, Lucien hadn't really had any respite.

* * *

The day was barely advanced when the dreams began for Nicolas. He twisted and turned in the bed eventually waking his bedmate. LaCroix nearly screamed as the visions of the sun and the scorching pain of burns invaded his mind. He reached for Nicolas who was now trying to climb out of the bed. Tussling with his section of bed clothes, LaCroix was unprepared for the violence of the attack that followed.

Nicolas' eyes and fangs were prominent as he held onto the stunned LaCroix. Instead of fighting back, LaCroix relaxed and let Nicolas' beast have its way. He leaned his head back as the "other" Nicolas dived for his throat. A peace settled over LaCroix as Nicolas fed at the rich blood of the jugular. Nicolas' hands began roaming as the secondary characteristics of taking blood from this vein took over. His fingers rubbed LaCroix's nipples then made their way lower. LaCroix turned, dislodging the other's fangs from his neck, wanting further satisfaction. In this position, he forced Nicolas to sink his teeth into the large artery while he moaned in both pain and arousal. Nicolas' hands found LaCroix's engorged penis and began to systematically torment it. He rubbed and tugged. He rolled the heavy balls between his fingers. Then he released his fangs from the elder vampire's neck and they turned to face each other.

The glittering yellow began fading from the deep blue eyes through which a hint of sanity glowed. Nicolas took LaCroix's hand and kissed the palm. The elder vampire sighed, remembering the gesture that had been a signal between them through the ages; a symbol of what Nicolas wanted, but

would not say. LaCroix knew he wanted to be dominated—LaCroix understood that he wanted to feel owned and safe. Nicolas wanted to relinquish all responsibilities.

Both men were kneeling on the rumpled bed linen, facing each other. Leaning toward Nicolas, LaCroix placed a tender kiss on his forehead and spoke more kindly to Nicolas than he had in decades, "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes, Lucien," Nicolas raised his eyes to LaCroix's and continued, "At this point, I need to feel alive again. I want to cleanse the last few weeks from my memory." Nicolas' voice dropped to a husky whisper. In a lesser personage, the words that were spoken could have been a whine or a whimper. From Nicolas they were a demand. There was a steadiness in his voice and a determination in demeanor.

LaCroix had wanted this for centuries. However, he hadn't wanted it at such a price—He would have preferred Nicolas turning to him willingly instead of wounded and in pain. He was turning to his oldest menace for protection from the memories of something that had proved worse than anything LaCroix had ever dreamed up. Nevertheless, he was quite pragmatic about it. He would take Nicolas any way that he could.

Growling his assent, LaCroix took Nicolas in his arms and both fell back into the pillows. He sank his fangs into the alabaster neck. Both became even more aroused as the blood exchange entered its second phase. LaCroix pulled back and looked at the dreamy expression on his cherished lover. He never admitted to either of his change-children how Nicolas fascinated him and how he wanted to possess him completely. Now was an opportunity that had been denied him for far too long.

He licked at the sluggishly draining wound on Nicolas' neck, then moved down to the chest. He nibbled absently on the erect nipples as he considered how to proceed. Nicolas whimpered in delight. His eyes were a glowing blue, defining his submission.

Using his hands as well as his mouth, he explored the long forbidden body. Even in its present state of emaciation, it was only beautiful to him. He kissed the burgeoning penis and sucked the furry balls between his lips. Then he turned his attention to the thickened cock. With a delicate nip,

his needle-like teeth pierced the slowly throbbing vein on the underside of the organ. He lapped the drops of blood that appeared then sucked gently from the bounty. It was here that the blood was the sweetest. LaCroix had to restrain himself from gulping what should be savored. Nicolas began to quiver in his arms and LaCroix pulled away to see how Nicolas was reacting. The blond head was thrashing on the pillow.

"Do it, Lucien. I want to feel you there and know that I'm really alive." There was nearly a plea in the silken voice.

LaCroix leaned forward and stilled the honeyed tones before Nicolas could say something he would regret later. Then he turned the thin body over and ran his hand down the prominent ribs. Lifting the man too easily, he reached for another pillow and slid it under Nicolas' hips. With little further preparation, he positioned himself over the sprawled figure. Using one hand to steady himself, he used the other to guide his penis to the place it most craved. It took a lot of restraint and effort to make the penetration slow and steady. He could hurt Nicolas, though not permanently, and could cause him some pain—neither of which was he interested in doing. Once he was in to the hilt, he let his mind slide down quickly into the other's mind. He thrust with his hips and matched it with his mind. He was repelled by the images he found there and quickly tried to soothe them. It would take more sessions than this one, he knew. But now was the time to make a start. Then it was over quicker than he had planned. He was convulsing in orgasm. The tie between their minds sent Nicolas over the edge at the same moment.

Slipping from between the spread thighs, LaCroix fell along side of his lover. He reached for the slender shoulders then let the weariness and stress of the day claim him as it was claiming Nicolas.

During the rest of the day LaCroix would wake occasionally from uneasy sleep absolutely sure that the huge disk of the sun was shining down on him. When he had attempted to calm the memories in Nicolas' mind, they had become firmly implanted in his own memories. Time would distance the recollections for both of them, but at the moment, they were painful for him as well as Nicolas. It would take a few more restorative encounters to

finish the healing. However, he was pleased that there was something left to heal.

* * *

It was late that evening when an uncharacteristically hurried and disordered Janette arrived with a fresh supply of blood and news. She landed heavily on the balcony outside with bottles clinking from the bulky pack she carried. Her weariness was obvious from her demeanor. Her shoulders were slumped and she rubbed her eyes and pushed ineffectually at her hair.

"We need to get out of here. I lost the Boche that tried to follow me before I took to the air. Our headquarters in this area was raided yesterday when we came back from the operation to free Nicolas. I think that dear, sweet Monique was reporting to other places than just to our group." Janette adjusted the scarf that tied back her hair and changed the subject. "I've brought some blood that I managed to steal from an army hospital. I think it's only proper that German blood be used to help him heal. If I thought he'd feed from them, I'd find as many SS troops as I could and bring them here. However, knowing our Nicolas, he would set them free to torture more French citizens. Or the poor Jews. I never thought I'd pity the Jews." Janette had never quite left behind the medieval attitude regarding Jews. In the environment in which she had lived as a mortal, all Jews were suspect individuals and regarded as killers of Christ. Even nearly a thousand years later, she retained that much of her mortality. She could never quite understand Nicolas' expending himself on their salvation until she had gotten a look at those camps. Then her attitude began a transformation.

"Yes, we should probably leave France. Nicolas should be able to travel slowly. Flying is out of the question for a while yet. However in view of what has happened, I do think that crossing the Channel is the prudent thing to do at the moment. I was going to suggest it would be best for Nicolas to be well out of this war, anyway." LaCroix rose and began to open the pack that had been set down by the glass doors to the balcony. "Nicolas is far from healed both mentally and physically." LaCroix glanced at the sleeping figure on the bed and then continued, "We will have to

hunt and save the bottles for Nicolas. Any ideas on how we are to cross the Channel?"

"The fishing fleet will take us as they have so many others. We just have to get to the coast and get in touch with my friends in that area. I have friends in England that will get us settled. The British Secret Service owes me."

"Is it wise to contact the Secret Service? We can make our way as we always have."

"One of our own is working for the Secret Service. In fact, he's one of Nicolas' fledglings."

LaCroix sat back stunned, "I didn't know Nicolas did that sort of thing any more."

Stopping momentarily, Janette then remembered the circumstances of the flyer's changing. "Uh...well, I guess you'll find out soon enough, mon cher."

Turning away from the pack leaning against Nicolas' bed, LaCroix towered over his blood daughter. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Last summer when you were working for the Gestapo, Nicolas took a pilot that you had questioned. He had some idea of saving his life, but you had done too good a job—or too bad a job—in your interrogations." She paused and looked into the blazing eyes of her master. "There was nothing to do, but bring him across."

LaCroix turned and crossed the room then leaned his forehead against the wall. Janette shuddered mentally as she thought of various ways he might react. His shoulders were shaking so Janette backed slowly toward the bed where Nicolas still slept. While she waited for the explosion, she checked on Nicolas' progress. Then she saw the slowly healing wounds in his neck and knew exactly what had transpired during the day. Yes, LaCroix was strengthening the blood connection, as he should considering Nicolas' health and recent experiences. She didn't want to imagine what had been done to him. No matter how much she tried to put it from her mind, however, it still haunted her dreams.

She flinched when a hand came down on her shoulder. Turning slowly, she faced her master with some trepidation.

"I think I remember that stubborn flyer. I assumed that the fools at the Gestapo had let him die before I could make use of him properly." LaCroix showed his teeth in a parody of a smile. "Do not worry, Janette, I don't blame you for Nicolas'

foolishness. There may be a time when I will call Nicolas for an accounting, but not just now. No... not just now." Janette wondered in what manner Nicolas would pay for taking the pilot from LaCroix. However, now wasn't the time to worry about it. The Nazi troops could find this chateau at any moment. They were searching the area and probably were going house-to-house at this moment. The raid on the compound had alerted the entire area. It was wonderful that d'Argenlac had been so close for Nicolas' sake, but it was now a problem for their escape.

LaCroix walked over to the bed and shook Nicolas by the shoulder. "Wake up, Nicolas." The younger vampire stirred and looked with blurred vision into his master's eyes.

"What...?"

"Janette thinks we should leave, and I agree." LaCroix then began helping the frail vampire to his feet and then into some clothes that were too large now.

Janette went to the closet and retrieved some outfits that she would need which she packed around the glass bottles. They would cushion the bottles and stop the rattling.

"I'll be back in a few moments," LaCroix said and left the room. She could hear him striding down the hall then down the stairs. Nicolas stood where LaCroix had left him. She walked over and touched him on the cheek. He turned to face her. She looked into his blue eyes and saw only pain.

"I killed an innocent girl," he said softly.

"Don't worry about her in the least. She died an easier death with you than if the resistance had caught up with her. It was all a trap, mon cher. The Gestapo was waiting at our rendezvous point. Most of our group was killed. Only the vampires were able to flee from their machine guns. She is the most likely candidate for betraying us."

"But I didn't know that," Nicolas countered.

"Merde, stop this guilt! Those people you killed incarcerated you and tortured you. She was there and she didn't try to help you. Don't regret killing one traitor!" She stopped and tried to gather her random thoughts. "Look at yourself... my men... all gone... And... and you feel guilty about killing those vermin. Sabastien's child betrayed the vampires and he's dead. If anyone is guilty for this whole fiasco, it is Sabastien for not looking after one

of his own." She shook her head and stomped across the room toward the windows.

Nicolas had no reply to her impassioned speech. He was saddened to hear about the men he had worked with for months.

LaCroix came back into the room, his face flushed. He had fed from his house servant, but the death he gave the man in ecstasy was a far easier one than the Gestapo would have. Since it would have upset Nicolas unnecessarily, he said nothing to his waiting children.

"Let's go," he said briskly. His two changelings nodded and gathered their meager packs. "It is a long way to the coast."

* * *

A two-night trek across France took closer to five because of the troop movements along the roads which made travel at night in stolen cars somewhat of a problem. Upon leaving the villa, the fugitives immediately came across search parties looking for the remnants of the maquis. Avoiding detection was a simple matter of hiding in the nearest culvert.

LaCroix left Nicolas in Janette's care while he acquired an automobile. Janette didn't inquire exactly what the circumstances were. This car got them a nearly a hundred kilometers before it had to be abandoned, leaving the vampires on foot or flying. LaCroix could fly short distances with Nicolas, but it was exhausting.

The crosscountry odyssey was completed in this fashion. LaCroix was strangely patient with Nicolas. Janette speculated on this with various scenarios, but found none of them satisfactory and neither of the men enlightened her. She wisely decided to leave her curiosity unappeased.

Once they neared the coast, the nightly bombing of the RAF was a menace mainly near the railroads, factories, or cities. The three vampires avoided those areas assiduously, but it still wasn't an easy trip.

The blood was fast running out. LaCroix knew there was only one solution; he had to feed on a human and then feed Nicolas. He was looking forward to the encounter.

It was nearly morning of the last night when they found shelter in a cave facing the narrow expanse of water that separated the continent from

the island stronghold that was England. LaCroix fed Nicolas the last of the bottled blood then made a bed for the two of them in a sheltered niche at the back of the cave.

The three rested companionably through the day with only a few recriminations. The next night Janette left to find her contact with the fishing fleet and LaCroix left to feed. Nicolas paced the meager shelter, testing his returning strength.

LaCroix returned first with blood on his fangs and licking his lips. Nicolas turned away in disgust. Smiling, LaCroix pulled Nicolas around to face him and said, "Nicolas, you would have approved of this night's work. I fed on a very frightened Gestapo interrogator. It was delightful."

Baring his fangs, he pulled Nicolas into an embrace. Lightly he settled his fangs on the nearly translucent skin on Nicolas' neck. Nicolas sighed and leaned into LaCroix's arms. Feeling the bloodlust aroused by his proximity to LaCroix, he snarled and pushed LaCroix into the wall. With little ceremony, he bit viciously into the other vampire's neck. LaCroix moaned into Nicolas' hair. Slowly they both sank to the rocky floor of the cave with LaCroix pinning the now very willing Nicolas.

As the younger vampire fed from him, LaCroix ran his hands over the too-slender body. His own arousal was firing his imagination. He wanted to immediately turn Nicolas over and sate his body in the other's. However, this moment had a double purpose. The first and primary purpose was to give Nicolas the strength to survive without further feeding from mortal blood. He wouldn't kill so this was the next best thing. Besides, LaCroix so enjoyed it. Also, LaCroix felt he could help Nicolas conquer the bitter memories of his imprisonment.

Nicolas pulled back with his yellow gleaming eyes and extended fangs. He licked his lips and pulled LaCroix's head down to his neck. The elder vampire licked the sluggishly pulsing vein then extended his fangs deliberately. He sucked slowly and then stopped before he had drank a tablespoonful. It was enough to set his lust free.

He let his eyes roam over the now limply sprawled body, enjoying the sight of the nearly hairless chest and slim hips. Nicolas' eyes had faded back to their rich blue. His fangs were still visible, but slowly receding. LaCroix leaned down and kissed the full lips and tasted his own blood.

Nicolas ran his tongue over LaCroix's extended eye-teeth. LaCroix began panting. There were not many things more erotic to him than to have his mouth explored this way, especially as Nicolas' tongue caught on a fang and bled a little.

LaCroix pushed out Nicolas' tongue and began to return the exploration. Nicolas was breathing heavier and heavier as LaCroix went deeper into his mouth.

They began to disrobe in a hurried fashion, piling their discarded clothes in a heap, forming a makeshift bed. LaCroix looked into the blue eyes that had fascinated him for centuries. He looked for acceptance and found it.

"A truce, for now, a truce," Nicolas whispered, sinking onto the heap of clothes. Then he pulled LaCroix down on top of him.

"Yes, let's call a truce in the middle of this war. Let's let the humans fight all they want, but we will not," LaCroix said into the curling, blond hair. Then with a chilling parody of a smile, he said menacingly, "Until I have a chat with you about this fledgling of yours that works for the British Secret Service." LaCroix watched Nicolas comprehend what he had said. There was a momentary look of fear on the mobile face which quickly shuttered all expression. Then he laughed lightly, "But not now I think. I have better things to do with you than ask silly questions."

"Yes, no silly questions," Nicolas said in relief as he felt between their bodies for the hard shaft that was nudging his belly. He rubbed it and then ran his fingers through the short curly locks that protected the firm balls. LaCroix took a huge breath and pulled away, but only long enough to caress the other's hard cock. With his fingers, he spread the pinkish precum liquid over Nicolas' belly then tickled the furry balls beneath.

Nicolas shoved LaCroix off him long enough to turn over. He pillowed his head on his forearms while LaCroix ran possessive hands over his rib cage then down to his ass. LaCroix took his time to soothe the fractious mount that Nicolas always had been. Then suddenly he thrust home. There was a moment of white-hot pain for both then stillness between them as they savored the closeness. The closeness that Nicolas needed after his weeks of isolation in a madman's laboratory. A closeness that LaCroix had always needed with Nicolas.

LaCroix extended his fangs and bit into the artery in the fair skin behind the right ear as his hands were busy with Nicolas' genitals. He only tasted the rich blood he craved. Remembering the other purpose behind this coupling, he gently dominated the elusive mind that belonged to his lover. He comforted the wounds which were still raw sores in the other's memory.

Then another more primitive hunger took over his body. He moved forward as Nicolas moved back to meet him. It seemed an eternity that they moved in this way. Soon an urgency came over Nicolas and he began to buck as LaCroix felt his hands fill with a thick liquid. Quickly the spasms of the body under him triggered his own passion. He thrust hard once more then froze momentarily while his being shattered in orgasm. He quieted the thrashing body of his much loved change-child.

Slumping heavily over Nicolas, LaCroix saw sparks before his eyes. He licked the small holes in the other's pale skin. Nicolas sighed and pushed LaCroix off him.

"Not romantic, I know, but you're heavy."

"We were never romantic. I *wouldn't* tolerate romantic from you."

"I know."

Pulling Nicolas over to his shoulder, LaCroix rubbed his shoulders and then down his chest.

"You are too thin. I don't quite see you fattening up on that bovine stuff you normally drink."

"I didn't drink bovine just now, did I? I don't think it will be a problem for a while."

The two reached for their clothes and shrugged into them. It was becoming chilly as a fog began rolling in over the beach below. It would be an ideal night to travel. Janette should be back soon with news of where and when to meet the fishing fleet.

Nothing was really settled between them, Nicolas thought as he watched the shifting waves. Perhaps someday there could be real peace, but for now there was a truce... a few moments of peace. Peace that he desperately needed after the past weeks.

Nicolas turned away from the mouth of the cave. LaCroix was studying him with an intensity that startled him. He had no idea what the man was thinking. He walked back to his own private demon

and savior and raised his mouth to the taller man's lips. He didn't want to think about the future. It was enough for the moment to be save and let someone else do the thinking and planning for him. He would worry about the future in the another day. Right now, he needed the security of LaCroix's affection and approval. Probably he would try his wings again as he had done in the past, but for now he was content to allow LaCroix to have his way.

* * *

Epilogue

Rolling over on dark silk sheets, Nick came instantly alert. He couldn't remember getting to his room last night. He couldn't remember more than driving the Caddy into his garage and shutting the door against the coming day. How he had gotten from the garage to the loft apartment then to his own bed wasn't clear.

Raising himself up, he saw that he was in his own black pajamas. Somehow he must have done everything by instinct, he decided. As he started to go into the bathroom, he saw sitting on his bedside table a stick pin which had been stuck through an envelope. Both were propped up against the nightlight. He slowly reached for it as though reaching toward a rattlesnake.

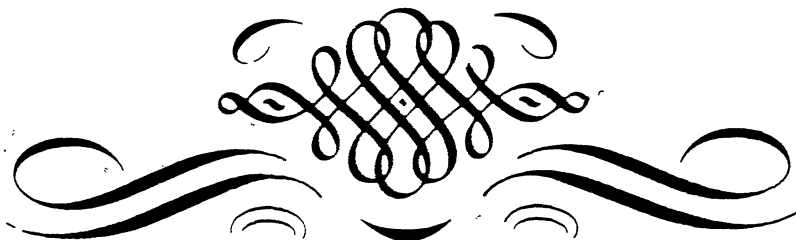
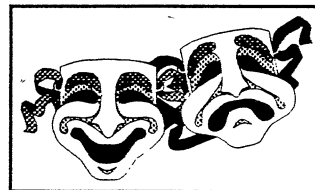
Opening the envelope, he saw very familiar handwriting. It said, "*Remember, Nicolas, I always know when you are in pain.*" There was no need for a signature. He could almost hear the voice and feel the hands that had carried him from his car and up the stairs the previous morning. They were the same hands and voice that had salvaged his sanity over 50 years ago. How LaCroix had traveled to his rescue during the day, he couldn't imagine. But then, LaCroix was a law unto himself.

He pondered the note and contemplated a stop at the radio station on his way to work. Then he decided not tonight, but perhaps another time. He had a lot of nights to think about it. Right now, he had a murder case to solve. And he didn't want to confront LaCroix while the memories of that time in France were so raw. He knew now that LaCroix had suppressed them to ease his pain. He half resented LaCroix's tinkering with his mind, but on the other hand, he was thankful for his help.

Also, there were two fledglings in Toronto that he wanted to get acquainted with. Hutch, he knew in another lifetime, a time that was now dimly returning. Starsky, he wanted to understand for the sake of his own child, Hutch. It would be interesting to find out how that match-up had happened.

Knight showered, shaved, and dressed, then left the loft, directing his Caddy toward the Coroner's Office for another night with Toronto's Finest. Perhaps Natalie would have some information, but he was mainly looking forward to her company. He would think about LaCroix another time. He and LaCroix had an eternity—forever—to solve their personal problems.

Not quite the end of the matter.



Troubled Times

by
Mary L Millard

The situation should have been the same as any other. The scene in the abandoned warehouse had been repeated countless times before. Yet this time when Napoleon shouted at his partner for covering gunfire, he received no response. For a moment Solo wondered if his friend had been hit and injured without his knowing, though that seemed impossible with what limited gunfire had been exchanged. Left with no choice but to make his move without Illya's assistance, Solo darted across the room, sliding into shelter behind a stack of crates.

"Illya? Illya!" Certain his partner was nearby, Napoleon called to the Russian again. "Illya, are you hit? What's going on?"

"I — I am not certain," Illya replied in a halting whisper. "I am not wounded, though."

"All right, then this time work with me, damn it," Napoleon hissed at him. "We've got to get out of here before those timed charges blow. We've only got about two minutes — so on the count of three let's move."

This time, much to Napoleon's relief, Illya was able to follow his partner's instructions and they raced from the building, leaving their THRUSH opponents

behind. They had barely reached their car when the first explosion rocked the wooden building, quickly followed by more. As Napoleon sped away from the devastated structure he noticed that Illya had kept his head bowed the entire time.

Safely away from the building and out of danger, Napoleon pulled off to the side of the road, laying a hand on his partner's arm. "Illya? Are you all right now?" Sincere concern filled Solo's voice. "What happened to you back there?"

"I — I believe the common term for it is freezing," Illya answered, his head still averted. "As in, I was unable to shoot or move. I do not know why or — or what happened; I only know that is

what occurred."

"Thank goodness that's all it was," Napoleon said soothingly, rubbing his hand along the Russian's arm. "I was afraid you'd been hit and I hadn't realized. I don't remember anything like this ever happening to you before."

As he talked Napoleon rubbed the back of the Russian's neck lightly, hoping to ease some of Illya's stress, pleased when Illya leaned back into the gesture and sighed.

"I don't believe anything like this ever has happened," Illya admitted. "And for certain I cannot tell you why it did now. I do recall being a bit preoccupied earlier with certain thoughts that might have led to something like this, but I cannot say that was the cause for sure."

"Certain thoughts?" Napoleon pressed. "What do you mean?"

"Thoughts of what I would do if at some point I could not protect you. If you were to be injured or killed because of me." Illya leaned his head back still further against Solo's hand. "It was when we were on stake-out earlier, waiting. And I was thinking a bit about — things. I couldn't help thinking how awful it would be if something were to happen to you and it was my fault."

"And so when the time came to cover me you reacted just the opposite and froze up," Napoleon surmised, nodding. "In a strange way, that almost makes sense. I don't know what you're worried about, though. You've always backed me up just fine."

"Yes, I suppose." Napoleon had the uneasy feeling there was more to his fears than Illya had said. "Never mind. I'm sure it is nothing. I'm just glad this affair is essentially completed so I can have a bit of time off to think things through."

"Think what things through?" Napoleon asked, his tone guarded. "Illya, what else is going on that

you aren't telling me?"

"Nothing serious. Don't worry." Illya smiled and glanced at his watch. "Come, let's get back to Headquarters and file our reports so that we can retire for the evening. I could very much use a good night's rest."

Though Napoleon agreed and said nothing more on the subject, he remained unusually quiet all the way back to U.N.C.L.E. HQ. They had been partners long enough for him to sense when something was bothering the Russian, which he knew was very much the case that night. He made a mental note to pursue the matter more intently the following day.

Unfortunately they were directed to Alexander Waverly's office immediately upon their arrival at headquarters where Napoleon was informed he was leaving again immediately. Under other circumstances he would have relished his assignment to take charge of U.N.C.L.E.'s London office, yet now all he felt was regret, preferring to stay and sort things out with his friend. It didn't escape his notice that Illya scarcely blinked at hearing Solo was going alone, and almost looked relieved. Whatever was troubling the silent Russian, Napoleon knew it was serious.

* * *

Following his arrival in London, Napoleon had little time to think of his partner as he struggled to manage an office nearly as large as U.N.C.L.E. New York. Several times during lax periods he attempted to contact Kuryakin, but never received a reply. His questions to Alexander Waverly met with such non-committal answers that Napoleon became convinced of a conspiracy. By the time he returned to New York some five weeks after the incident in the THRUSH warehouse, contacting the Russian and getting some straight answers was foremost on Solo's mind.

Though he arrived in New York on a Saturday evening, the senior agent went to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters immediately. Groaning at the amount of paperwork his desk had accumulated in his absence, Napoleon checked and found his partner's desk typically tidy, inordinately so. Checking the duty roster, Solo was surprised to see Illya listed as being on Sick Leave; frowning, he checked the past posted rosters as well. As far back as they went, some four weeks, the "S/L" notation remained the

same.

More determined now than ever for answers, Napoleon went directly to his superior, not at all surprised to find the man working even on Saturday night. Though Waverly's eyebrows raised briefly as Napoleon entered, his expression remained otherwise unperturbed. *Almost as if he knew I'd come here looking for answers*, Napoleon thought suspiciously, then banished the thought as ridiculous.

"Welcome back, Mr. Solo," the old man said pleasantly as Napoleon approached him. "I hear you did quite well with your recent task. I trust Mr. Harris has recovered from his accident and is back in charge of the office now?"

"Yes, sir," Napoleon nodded. "Sir, I need to contact Illya, but I see he's been on sick leave for several weeks. Has something happened during my absence I should know?"

"There is a great deal you should know, Mr. Solo," Waverly responded gravely, "but nothing that should come from me. I believe Mr. Kuryakin would prefer to explain the situation to you himself."

"I see. And where might I find Mr. Kuryakin? He isn't in his office and doesn't answer either his phone or communicator, so where would you suggest I try?" Though Napoleon hated playing word games, there were times he knew he had no choice, this obviously being such a case. Locking his jaw, he waited for his superior to reply.

"I'd suggest the U.N.C.L.E. medical facility," Waverly said finally. "East wing, I believe, second floor."

Mentally reviewing the medical section layout, Napoleon frowned, certain the second floor east wing was a residential care unit for patients unable to care for themselves yet not requiring constantly supervised care. Unable to imagine anything which might place his partner in such a classification, he resolved to learn Illya's condition at once.

"Thank you very much, sir," Napoleon said politely. "I believe I'll be on my way. It's still early enough I might be able to see him yet tonight."

"Mr. Solo?" Napoleon stopped and turned back toward the old man, surprised to find sympathy on the withered face. "Good luck to both you and Mr. Kuryakin. Please give him my best."

A chill running down his spine at the ominous dismissal, Napoleon nodded then hurried off. He had always felt that one of the best advantages of working for U.N.C.L.E. was its self-contained nature, including the medical facility, but he had never

appreciated it more than he did that night. It seemed the elevator took forever to transport him into the medical wing then on to its second floor.

Although he had to obtain Illya's location from the nurse's station, Napoleon chose not to inquire about his condition then, preferring to hear it all from Illya. Directed to Unit G, Napoleon tapped hesitantly on the door, relieved to hear a familiar voice respond softly, "Come in." He took a deep breath as he opened it and stepped inside.

The first thought to cross Napoleon's mind as he entered was how cozy the unit seemed to him, much like a nice hotel, done in warm brown and ivory tones. A moment later his eyes fell on his partner reclining on the couch in the corner, noting his wan pallor, thinner than ever stature, and the dark circles beneath his eyes. He also could never recall his partner lying around in pajamas at the relatively early hour of ten P.M. as he was doing now.

"So you have finally found me." Moving very slowly, Illya sat up as he spoke. "I suspected it would not take too much longer. Are you back to stay?"

"If you mean from London, yes. Harris recovered and is back on duty." Napoleon crossed the room. "The first thing I did when I got back this evening was start trying to find you."

Watching as Illya sat up, Napoleon noticed a careful favoring of his right leg, then saw the pair of crutches lying on the floor. Making no attempt to disguise the path his eyes were taking, he stood by the couch waiting for his friend to speak. A few moments later, Illya gestured for him to sit down.

"You may as well be comfortable as you listen," the Russian told him. "I doubt you will like what you hear. And most likely you shall never forgive me for not telling you before. But you must believe me when I say that I had my reasons, that I felt it was for the best."

Sitting down beside him, Napoleon gestured to Illya's awkwardly outstretched leg. "Is this why you have to stay here?" he inquired. "That you haven't gone home?"

"Yes — partially." Kuryakin sighed. "It is a very complex situation, Napoleon. I suggest you allow me to start at the beginning and progress forward. It will make far more sense that way."

Though Napoleon suspected he would indeed not wish to hear what the Russian had to tell him, he nodded, then waited for his friend's next words.

"Do you recall our last assignment before you

left for London?" Illya began. "The incident in the THRUSH warehouse when I froze?" He paused just long enough for Solo to nod. "At that time I said I had been thinking about something that disturbed me, something that might endanger your safety as well as mine. That 'something' was a pain in my leg which had been steadily worsening for some time.

"After you left for London I decided to see a doctor about it, though I expected it was merely an old injury for which nothing could be done. After several days of testing by not only Dr. Lawrence but several specialists they gave me a tentative diagnosis of cancer, something called osteogenic sarcoma, to be precise."

"Dear God," Napoleon murmured. "Illya, no."

"I'm afraid it is yes, Napoleon," Illya said softly. "Their diagnosis now has been confirmed. It began in a tumor on my knee most likely, one they performed surgery on three weeks ago. They were able to remove a great deal of it, but unfortunately not all."

Feeling so stunned that he could barely think much less comment, Napoleon blinked several times when the Russian paused, trying to clear his mind. Several moments later he looked again to his friend. "You said they were able to remove most of it," he noted. "What about the rest? From what they leave, won't the cancer spread?"

"Possibly. If it hasn't already." Illya looked at his lap and sighed. "Which they suspect it has. Apparently this is a very rapidly growing cancer that is hard to cure. The reason they have kept me here, in addition to allowing my leg to heal, is because on Monday I begin chemotherapy. They are hoping that, in conjunction with the surgery, will slow the cancer's growth a bit at least."

"Slow it? Not cure it?" Napoleon was growing increasingly more disturbed with each new revelation his partner shared. He definitely didn't like the conclusions for the future he was drawing, yet knew Illya was right to tell him the truth. He waited, half holding his breath, for Illya's response.

"There is no cure, Napoleon. I'm sorry." Illya's voice was devoid of expression as he spoke. "I wish I could tell you differently, just as they wished they could tell me, but one cannot alter facts. The survival rate for this particular cancer is roughly 5% over five years, usually a great deal less."

Though Napoleon had felt a lump threatening to rise in his throat earlier in Illya's dissertation, this time it came full force, accompanied by hot moisture

which stung the back of his eyes. Turning his head away sharply, he fought hard to regain control of his emotions, his hands clenched in fists at his sides. Then he felt Illya's hand come to rest on his arm, and a sob broke from his throat.

"Dear Napoleon," the Russian murmured. "Do not weep for me, please. I did not wish to upset you so. But it was inevitable that you soon would find out, and I thought perhaps you might prefer to hear it from me. I had no wish to put you through such distress."

"Well, what the hell am I supposed to do, be happy?" Solo shot back. "You're talking about losing your life. Which just happens to be the life of my partner and best friend. You thought I'd just accept this and not care the way you seem to? Well, I'm sorry, but I can't. You mean more to me than that. Apparently life means more to me than it does to you."

Distraught, Napoleon got up and walked across the room then, stopping beside the window to look out at the New York night. His head reeling with all Kuryakin had told him, the Russian's apathy confused him even more. *It's almost like he doesn't care if he's dying*, he thought, feeling bitter. *Like he doesn't give a damn*. Then he heard a half-chuckle, half-sob from behind him, forcing him to turn.

"Napoleon, you have no idea how much life means to me," Illya said, raising tear-filled eyes to Solo. "Much more than I ever knew. Thinking of all the things I used to dream of, all that I would like to accomplish that can never happen — no, my friend, you are very wrong in thinking this has been easy for me. These past few weeks have been hell."

"Oh God." Napoleon returned to the couch, dropping down beside his friend. "Illya, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." Instinctively, he opened his arms. "Come here."

The senior agent was almost surprised not to find the Russian at all hesitant, the "Ice Man" who always before had shied away from any personal contact at all. Instead, this time, he wrapped his arms around Solo and held on tightly, the grasp saying even more than his previous words. Feeling the stifled sobs, Napoleon rubbed the too-thin back gently, surprised by how closely Illya pressed to his chest. And though the sobs gradually subsided and ended, he was well aware the embrace continued on.

"If only things could have been different." Illya sighed the words as he turned his head to rest against Napoleon's shoulder more comfortably. "So

many things I would have tried to change. Now — now there is so little time left to me, it would be pointless anyway."

Frowning as he tried to make sense of the cryptic words, Napoleon idly reached up to smooth the tousled blond hair, surprised to find it as soft as he often had thought it looked. Fascinated by the silken strands, he carded them through his fingers, noting the varying shades of blond as he did. It took several minutes before he realized Illya's breathing had become unsteady and that the Russian had not spoken again.

"Illya? Are you okay?" Napoleon pulled back slightly, trying to view Illya's face. "Are you in pain?"

"Only a little." Slowly, appearing reluctant, Kuryakin released his grip and sat back on his own. "I'm sorry for leaning on you there so long. It simply — the contact felt very good."

"Don't apologize. I wasn't complaining," Solo smiled. "It felt nice to me too. Besides, that's part of friendship, being there in times of need. I just wish I'd been here this past month for you. Why didn't you let me know?"

"Because I knew you would feel it was your duty to return and be here with me, when there was nothing you could do." Wincing, Illya rubbed at his right thigh. "The first week was all sorts of testing, then the second week they did surgery. I've been in the hospital recuperating from that until yesterday; then they moved me here."

"Because you'll need someone with you during the chemotherapy treatments?" Napoleon asked, uncertain. "Is that why you can't go home?"

"It would seem so. I am not completely certain. I have been told that the treatments customarily make one quite ill, so I presume that is why I cannot be alone. The accommodations here are comfortable," he added, shrugging. "I really don't mind."

"Yes, but wouldn't you rather be in more familiar surroundings?" Napoleon couldn't imagine anyone being willing to stay in a sterile environment. "I know I would."

"Well, of course it would be preferable," Illya hesitated, "but — What are you getting at? If I cannot stay alone, the point is moot."

"Not if I could be there with you." Seeing Illya's immediate intent to protest, Solo raised his hand. "Listen, I've been thinking of taking some time off anyway, and I know I want to now. So

there's no point in your staying here when you can come home with me."

"Napoleon, don't be ridiculous," Kuryakin argued. "We have never lived together. Most likely we would drive each other mad. Besides, if these treatments do make me ill, you certainly would not wish to have to care for me nor is it a task I would wish on you. I appreciate the offer, truly, but I must refuse."

"Would you do it if I asked it as a favor to me?" Napoleon asked softly, his eyes searching Illya's. "Because that's what it would be. I hate to phrase it this way, but — if we can't have all the years as partners I've always expected, then I want to spend more time with you now. I don't mind if I have to take care of you either. That's another part of friendship, you know."

At that Napoleon saw the Russian's resolve begin to weaken, leaving him triumphant with the knowledge he had won, that his friend would agree to go with him after all. Much to his surprise Napoleon realized he meant all that he had told his partner, that he did want them to spend as much time together as they could. He couldn't help grinning when the Russian looked away then, and shook his head.

"Sometimes, Napoleon, I do have cause to wonder about your intelligence," he murmured. "But since you put it that way — very well. I shall speak with Dr. Lawrence tomorrow about my release. However, I am doing this solely on one condition — that if my illness deteriorates too dramatically, you will permit me to return here. The last thing I would ever wish is for you to remain with me out of some sense of misplaced duty to our friendship or some other such nonsense. Will you give me your word?"

"You have it," Napoleon nodded solemnly, even shaking the hand Kuryakin offered to cement his words. "I'm just glad we'll be talking about my definition of a 'deteriorating condition,'" he added coyly, "not yours."

Though Illya groaned at that, he didn't argue, and they left the matter there, going on to more pleasant topics of discussion, including Napoleon's London trip. By the time Solo left, it was nearly midnight and he found himself hating to go even then — for himself, he knew Illya couldn't be released from the hospital and into his care a moment too soon.

* * *

Regrettably both had forgotten that the day following Napoleon's return was Sunday, making Illya's physician unavailable to discuss his release. Alexander Waverly, however, was in his office as usual, enabling Napoleon to present his formal request for an indefinite leave of absence, beginning immediately. Though it was not a meeting he was looking forward to, Solo knew it had to be done.

"No, Mr. Solo. I cannot permit it." That response was the last thing Napoleon had expected to hear. "Having both you and Mr. Kuryakin unavailable for duty? Absolutely not."

"But, sir, you don't seem to understand the situation." Napoleon was trying hard to keep his presence of mind. "It is imperative to both Mr. Kuryakin and I that I be with him on a full time basis however long he needs care."

"Correction, Mr. Solo. You only believe it is imperative to you. In truth, Mr. Kuryakin will fare quite well without having you there." The old man's expression softened only slightly as he met Napoleon's eyes. "I am aware of his, er, situation, however," he added, "and you do have my sympathy. The well-being of U.N.C.L.E. simply cannot afford to be without both its top Section Two agents. You do have my regrets."

"And you will have my resignation," Napoleon snapped, jumping up from the table. "Any organization that can be so unfeeling and cold-hearted toward a dying employee, I don't want any part of. You'll have my resignation on your desk within the hour. Sir."

Never in his life had Napoleon felt such outrage, so barely able to control himself. As he strode toward the door, it was all he could do to keep from tearing the badge from his suit coat in defiance toward all it had come to represent. He was nearly to the door when the sharp command of "Mr. Solo! Stop there, please" brought him to a reluctant halt. He wasn't even sure why he chose to obey it, other than pure reaction perhaps.

"Mr. Solo? Will you return here, please?" Reluctantly Napoleon turned, keeping his jaw set as he walked back to his superior. He didn't sit this time, but remained standing behind the chair immediately to Waverly's left. He waited, staring at the table, for the older man to speak.

"Perhaps we can reach a compromise," Waverly suggested, his tone a bit more gentle. "Perhaps I could spare you for a short time period, providing you brief Mr. Slate on all your active cases

before you go. Would a month help make us seem a bit less cold-hearted, Mr. Solo? Hmm?"

Though he had no idea how long Illya might have to undergo the chemotherapy or how quickly the cancer might progress, Napoleon knew the month-long offer was, for Alexander Waverly, a huge sacrifice. He also knew that once Mark Slate took over command of Section Two, Waverly would have no further worries, finding the British agent more than competent. Reluctantly, Napoleon nodded his head.

"Yes, a month would help a great deal," he conceded. "Thank you, sir. I apologize for my earlier behavior, but the situation with Mr. Kuryakin has left me rather unnerved."

"As it has all of us, Mr. Solo," the old man said kindly. "Mr. Kuryakin is a very special young man to us all. It is most unfortunate such a malady has had to befall him at such an early point in his life."

"Yes, sir. I agree." Napoleon forced down the lump in his throat. "I have a month, then, sir?" he verified. "Beginning when?"

"As soon as you can prepare Mr. Slate to take over. I shall notify him of his new assignment today. I presume you'll still be available for consultation in light of any problems, so I suppose you could begin on Tuesday if you wish."

"Thank you, sir. That should work out quite well." Solo could hardly wait to tell his partner the news. "Perhaps Mr. Slate could meet me in my office first thing tomorrow morning so we can get right to work."

"I will advise him of that," Waverly nodded. "Good luck to you both, Mr. Solo," he added. "I hope Mr. Kuryakin's treatments will be of benefit."

"As we all do," Napoleon smiled. "Thank you, sir."

* * *

Despite the knowledge that he had a mountain of paperwork to clear from his desk before he could turn the position over to Mark Slate, Napoleon headed for the Medical Unit when he finished with Waverly. Having talked briefly with his friend via communicator earlier that morning, Napoleon knew Illya was aware of his plan. His mission now successfully completed, he was eager to share the news with his friend.

Arriving at Illya's room shortly after lunch

time, Napoleon walked in to find the Russian literally picking at his food, looking up with a start when Napoleon tapped on the door then walked in. Solo was surprised by how dispirited the pale blue eyes were, and the generally weary look on his partner's face. Napoleon walked over and laid a hand on Illya's shoulder in an expression of concern.

"Not having a good day?" he inquired. "Or is it just the lousy hospital food?"

"No, the food is acceptable," Illya replied, sighing. "I simply had a very poor night. I was thinking too much and my knee was hurting — Don't worry, I will be fine."

Sitting down across the tiny table, Napoleon watched as Illya pushed his food around a little more before finally laying the fork aside. His heart ached at the sight of his friend's discomfort, particularly knowing it would only get worse in the weeks to come. He quickly pushed that thought aside as he gestured to the apple on Illya's plate.

"You know what they say about an apple a day," he quipped. "You should try to eat that much, at least. You can't live just by smelling the food, you know."

"I've been managing fairly well all the time I've been here," the Russian responded, but did pick up the fruit and take a bite. "How did your meeting go with Mr. Waverly?"

"Fine after I threatened him with my resignation." Napoleon described the discussion in capsulated form. "I figure once he sees how well Mark does I won't have any problem extending my leave well beyond the month he gave me to start."

"I still don't like this," Illya said dubiously, shaking his head. "For you to sacrifice all your time and career just to care for me like this — it isn't right. You don't even know what sort of care I may need as the disease progresses, what sort of problems you may be asking for. If you feel so strongly about my not staying here in the hospital then let me hire a live-in nurse or something. I do have a bit of savings tucked away, you know."

"Illya, money isn't the object," Napoleon replied, feeling frustrated. "Besides, I thought we settled this last night. You're doing this as a favor to me. And I'm not sacrificing anything; I need a vacation too."

Although Illya merely sighed then and didn't pursue the matter, Napoleon got the feeling it was more because he was too weary than because he agreed. As he cajoled the Russian into eating the

rest of the rest of the apple and a few mouthfuls of the casserole entree, Napoleon wondered if such scenes would repeat themselves once Illya came home. Though he fervently hoped not, Solo knew it still didn't change his mind — more than anything he wanted Illya home at his side.

* * *

Due to the Russian's fatigue, Napoleon cut his visit short that day and spent the afternoon at his desk, setting aside pertinent papers to use as illustrations for Mark and processing the rest. It was after six P.M. before he moved from his desk that evening, tired but pleased with the progress he'd made. When a brief stop at Illya's room found him sleeping, Napoleon left him a note and went home to begin arranging things there so his friend would feel at home.

He was just getting out of the shower when his communicator beeped shortly after seven on Monday morning, answering to find his partner on the other end. "Dr. Lawrence has approved my release," he said, his voice void of expression. "If you still have not changed your mind, you can pick me up when you leave the office this evening. Due to my knee, I am not allowed to drive."

"No problem," Napoleon said breezily. "I'll be there between five and six. Didn't you say you have your first chemotherapy treatment today too? Do you know what time or how long it lasts?"

"A few hours, I believe. I am not certain. And yes, it is today. Why?"

"Just wondering." In truth, Solo had hoped to be with his friend. "I wanted to be sure I was thinking of you at the right time to wish you good luck."

"The treatment is scheduled for nine A.M., I believe," Illya answered. "Something like nine until three or four." He paused. "Napoleon, do you think we might order out for Chinese food tonight for dinner?" he asked hopefully. "I'll buy."

"Anything you want, tovarich," Napoleon laughed, amused by the Russian's child-like plea. "You sound a little better this morning than yesterday when I saw you. Did the extra rest help?"

"I believe so, yes. Thank you. Also thank you for the note last night. Good luck training Mark today. Please give him my best."

"Will do," he responded. "By the way, I'm looking forward to tonight, to bringing you home. I

hope you are too."

"I always look forward to Chinese food." Napoleon shook his head at the cryptic response. "I shall see you later, Napoleon," Illya concluded. "And thank you — for everything."

Though Solo heard the channel close before he had time to respond to his partner's last comment, the conversation put his day off to a buoyant start, a mood which lasted throughout his training session with Mark Slate. As he had predicted, the younger agent proved to be a quick study, readily comprehending the duties and procedures Napoleon explained. By the close of the day at five P.M. he had no qualms whatsoever about leaving his office in the Brit's hands.

"It's really nice of you, you know, what you're doing," Mark told Napoleon as they put the last folders away. "Most people wouldn't make the kind of sacrifices for their partners like you're doing for Illya."

"Now you sound like him," Napoleon grumbled. "Believe me, Mark, it's no sacrifice at all. In fact, I'm probably being selfish by wanting him to spend so much time with me, but I can't bear the thought of what's coming without spending as much time with him as I can."

"Yeah, it's a real shame we'll have to lose him this way," Mark said sadly. "I'd like to pop around and see him sometime too. I managed to get to the hospital a few times, but not as much as I wanted to."

"It's difficult," Napoleon nodded. "That's why I wanted the time off. But sure, you'll always be welcome. I don't know how these new treatments will affect him, so you might want to call first, though. Just in case."

"I would. Thanks, mate." Slate shrugged into his jacket and looked around the room. "Okay, I guess that's it, then. Tomorrow she's mine."

"With my blessings," Napoleon grinned, feeling no regret at all. "Don't hesitate to call if you have problems, though I know you'll do fine."

Much to Napoleon's relief, Mark left the office and headed down the hall then, leaving Napoleon free to depart as well. He covered the distance to Medical in what seemed like record time then, heading directly for Illya's Unit G. He wasn't at all surprised to find the Russian dressed in his typical black turtleneck and black slacks attire, patiently waiting for him to arrive.

"Well, it's about time you got here." At the

sharp tone of Illya's voice, Napoleon stopped cold, stunned by the reproof. "I was beginning to think you had gone home and forgotten all about me. It is 5:28 P.M., you know."

"Yes, and I told you I'd be here between five and six, if you'll recall correctly." Napoleon knew his friend was teasing by then. "I don't think I'll even ask how you're doing after an insulting greeting like that."

"All right, if you won't ask I'll tell you. I'm doing very well." With the aid of his crutches, Illya rose. "My treatment today consisted of nothing more than lying on a table for five hours while they dripped assorted drugs into my veins. It wasn't unpleasant at all."

"And no side effects either?" Napoleon beamed when Illya shook his head. "Great. Then what do you say we go home and celebrate with a feast of Chinese food? Personally, I'm starved."

"I believe even I can eat this evening," Illya replied, grinning at Napoleon's feigned expression of shock. "So stop talking and start moving," he ordered, nudging Solo's leg with his crutch. "I want to go home."

* * *

Though "home" for Illya now was Napoleon's lavish apartment, the Russian appeared unfazed, settling in as though he had lived there for years. Napoleon was pleasantly stunned to see how quickly Illya adapted to his new surroundings, and how relaxed he seemed. He also found himself wondering why, when his friend was nearly his old self, he even needed a full-time companion. He chose not to voice that question aloud.

Keeping to his word, he ordered a lavish Chinese take-out dinner from the nearby deli, one he knew Illya enjoyed judging by the amount he ate. Afterward they passed the evening discussing Solo's recent London assignment, yet conspicuously avoided mentioning his training that day of Mark Slate. Napoleon was afraid that to do so would cause a return of Illya's guilt feelings, which was the very last thing he wished to do.

It was barely nine P.M. when Napoleon noticed his friend growing weary, the blue eyes struggling to stay open as they talked. Finally, a lull in the conversation gave him the break he had been waiting for. "Illya, you know if you're tired you don't have to stay up with me," he said quietly. "I do realize

you're still sick, you know."

"I know," Illya sighed. "I'm sorry. I have just been enjoying our time. Unfortunately you are right; I am very weary. I believe I shall call it a night."

"Do you need help with anything?" Napoleon offered. "Remember I'm here if you do. And what time are you scheduled for your treatment tomorrow? Nine o'clock again?"

"Actually, I don't have a treatment tomorrow." Illya pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from his pants pocket, handing it to his friend. "I was a bit surprised myself to learn that it isn't a daily ritual."

Scanning the two week schedule, Napoleon saw that the treatments were of five hour duration, beginning at 9 A.M. Though he had Tuesday off, Illya was scheduled for treatments Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, then nothing the following week. It pleased him to see that they would have the weekends to themselves, uninterrupted, as well as the alternate weeks.

"Napoleon, I — I do not know how to thank you for what you are doing." Illya gazed at the floor as he spoke. "Though I feel very guilty about the sacrifices you are making for me, I have not the strength to refuse. Knowing I likely have so little time left, it means a great deal to me to be spending it with you."

"Which is exactly how I feel," Napoleon replied, coming to sit on the sofa beside him. "I don't want to waste a minute of the time we have. I don't know how you want to spend the time you have left, but I swear I'll do everything in my power to make your wishes come true. I've never had anyone who meant to me what you do," he added softly. "Not even Melissa, in a way." The reference to his late wife was rare. "I never thought I'd say this to another man, but I love you, Illya. Very much."

Even as he spoke them the words surprised the senior agent, having been unaware of the depth of his feelings until just then. But it was true, he realized, he did love his partner, then found himself hoping Illya would not take offense. He didn't have long to worry, however, as a moment later the Russian turned toward him with tear-bright eyes and open arms which Napoleon entered willingly.

"Such beautiful words, Napoleon. And so precious." Illya hugged him tight then shifted positions to rest his cheek in the curve of Solo's neck. "If only I could tell you how much you mean to me also, as you always have."

Gently rubbing Illya's back as he listened, Napoleon smiled at the tender words, knowing how very rare for the Russian they were. Frustrated by the dense fabric of Illya's turtleneck, Napoleon slid his hand up the back beneath it, striving for better contact with the warm skin. He was surprised by his partner's catch of breath as he ran his hand lightly up the thin spine.

"Does that hurt you?" he asked, pausing with his hand resting between the pronounced shoulder blades. "I just thought a little massage might feel good."

"I'm sure it would, very. And no, there is no pain." Yet Illya's voice remained oddly strained, confusing Solo all the more.

"Well, something's wrong," he said. "I can feel it." He began a gentle, circular massage as he talked. "Are you uncomfortable sitting here, is that it? It probably would be better if you were laying down. I should have thought of that before."

"No, I am not uncomfortable either," Illya told him. "At least not yet. It is just that I am afraid that I — if you continue, I may become much too comfortable yet very uncomfortable at the same time."

Now thoroughly bewildered, Napoleon pulled back to scan the Russian's face, hoping to find some explanation there. All he found, however, was a slight flush to the pale cheeks and Illya looking evasive, neither of which told him anything. Finally, frustrated, he shook his head.

"You and your cryptic comments," he grumbled. "I guess I'll just have to try and figure out what you're saying later because right now I think you could use a good massage. Come on, tovarich," he said, rising. "Let's go where we can do this right."

"No. We cannot do that." Illya's refusal was so curt and rapid, it caused Solo to frown. "That is, I — I am rather tired this evening," he finished lamely, fumbling with his crutches as he stood. "Perhaps another time."

Napoleon allowed the younger man to steady his feet and even begin walking away from him before he spoke again. His voice was deliberately soft and quiet when he did so, hoping to elicit a truthful answer this time. "Illya, why are you running away from me?" he asked, pleased to see his friend abruptly halt. "I may not understand what you're trying to tell me, but I do know when you're scared, and for some reason, you're afraid of me

right now. Tell me why, tovarich," he said, coming up to stand close behind his partner. "Tell me what's going on. I need to understand."

"I feared I would not be able to keep my secret if I came here." Illya's tone was sad, and he hung his head. "But you must believe me — I never meant for you to know. When you touch me now, it is beyond my control, however. I cannot help feeling as I do." Napoleon actually heard him swallow then. "I love you, Napoleon," he confessed, in barely more than a whisper. "More precisely, I am in love with you."

Shocked into silence by his partner's words, Napoleon could not have been more stunned by anything. Though he had often wondered about Illya's sexual inclinations in past years, such a thought as this had never crossed his mind. He was still recovering from the shock when he realized Illya had again begun moving, hobbling away.

"Hey, wait. You can't drop a bombshell like that then leave me." He followed as Illya continued his slow trek toward the hall. "How long — how long have you felt this way?"

"Much longer than you would guess. Several years, actually." Illya continued on toward the bedroom he was to use. "If you wish to reconsider your offer of allowing me to stay here with you, I will understand."

"Reconsider? Of course not." Napoleon followed the Russian into the bedroom. "This doesn't change anything, really. It just — puts a little different perspective on things, that's all."

"A little different perspective?" Illya echoed, frowning as he dropped down on the edge of the bed. "Napoleon, do not insult me, please. You know perfectly well it changes everything. You shall wonder each time you touch me now what I am thinking, if indeed you can touch me at all. I can assure you, however, that I shall never impose any sort of unwanted affection on you," he added. "I have learned to keep my feelings well controlled."

"Yes, I'm sure you have," Napoleon replied. "Probably too well." He dropped to the floor, ignoring the Russian's surprised glance as he removed the loafer and sock from Illya's injured leg then proceeded to do the same with the left foot as well. Finished, he knelt in front of his partner, lightly resting his hands on Illya's thighs as he looked up into the soft blue eyes.

"I told you earlier I loved you," he reminded. "This doesn't change that at all. It just puts it all in

a different light. Even though I can't say that I'm in love with you also, I can say I'm very flattered that you love me. I don't know what can come of it, if anything, but don't be so hasty to judge. You never know. — revealing your little 'secret' just might turn out to be the best thing in both our lives."

* * *

Leaving his partner shortly after that conversation, Napoleon did a good bit of thinking the rest of that night, pondering Illya's confession and his own response. He was surprised to find that he was not at all offended by the Russian's intimate feelings, but instead discovered a few well-buried desires of his own.

His dreams that night were revelations to him also, ones he realized upon waking were not new. Visions of being in Illya's arms, of their kissing and caressing, of making love. He had experienced such thoughts before but repressed them, he realized, wondering if his partner had similar dreams as well. Had it not been for his concern over Illya's health he would have given in to the temptation of going to his partner and exploring his desires at the unseemly hour of five A.M.

Common sense discouraging him from that tactic, Napoleon compromised by getting up to check on his friend. Like a solicitous lover, he tucked the sheet and blanket in tighter around the slumbering figure, smiling when Illya grunted softly and snuggled up closer within the warmth. It was all Napoleon could do to force himself to leave rather than lying down and enfolding the slight figure in his arms. He suspected it wouldn't be long before he gave in to that very impulse — he only hoped Illya would agree.

* * *

Up shortly after six A.M. as usual, Napoleon did his best to be quiet as Illya slept on, knowing the Russian would need his rest. He was on his third cup of coffee and had finished reading the morning New York Times before he heard his friend stirring, then still forced himself to remain where he was. In light of the Russian's independent nature, he knew over-protectiveness would certainly be a cardinal sin.

"Is it really nine o'clock already?" Illya asked as he hopped into the kitchen on his crutches, still clad in his pajamas and robe. "I have not slept so

late in years."

"You must have needed the rest," Napoleon smiled. "Coffee?" He expected Illya's nod. "Does that mean you slept well? I hope so since I certainly did."

"Yes, I did. Thank you." Illya gestured to the steaming cup. "You have very comfortable accommodations. Far better than the hospital."

"Well, good. I'm glad to hear it." Napoleon refilled his own cup and sat down. "I wasn't sure what you eat for breakfast so I haven't fixed anything. What sort of things do you like?"

"This morning, I think nothing would be wisest." Illya kept his eyes down as he spoke. "My stomach does not seem particularly pleased with me today."

"Oh. I see. I'm sorry." Napoleon noticed the Russian's slightly gray-tinged pallor then. "Maybe you'd feel better if you went back and laid down."

"It's possible I may have to," Illya admitted, pushing his coffee cup away. "Even this is — Excuse me, please."

Napoleon was amazed at how quickly the Russian grabbed up his crutches and fled then, out of sight almost before Solo could move. As he reached the hallway he heard the unmistakable sound of his friend being ill in the bathroom, a sound which sent a chill up his spine. *And so it begins*, he thought morosely, recalling Illya's warning about the chemotherapy illness. Resolutely Napoleon squared his shoulders and entered the bathroom to care for his friend.

Due to his bandaged knee, Illya was hovering over the sink when Napoleon found him, his shoulders and arms trembling as they supported his weight. After rinsing out the sink, Napoleon dampened a washcloth with lukewarm water then wiped it lightly over the Russian's forehead and cheeks. Then he gently pulled Illya back against him, holding him tight in his arms.

"My poor Illyusha," he murmured. "How awful this must be for you. First the surgery and now this too. What I wouldn't give if I could take some of this for you."

"Believe me, you wouldn't want it." Illya drew a long, shaky breath. "I believe the worst has passed now, however. Could you help me back to bed?"

"Sure. Just forget the crutches. Hang onto me instead." Napoleon slid into position at his partner's side. "We learned this routine the first time you broke your leg, remember? Okay, now, just hop

along."

Moving in easy tandem, it didn't take long to reach Illya's bed where Napoleon fluffed the pillows then tucked him in. He patted the Russian's hand. "I'll go get you something a little more portable than the bathroom," he said with a smile. "Then what would you say to some tea? I imagine that would settle your stomach better than coffee, right?"

"Most likely. It sounds better also." Illya reached up to touch his partner's arm. "I am sorry for being such trouble," he apologized humbly. "I simply couldn't help myself."

"Don't you think I know that? Now, don't be silly." Napoleon patted his hand. "I'll be right back with the basin. Think you'll be okay?"

"Fine. For the moment." Illya closed his eyes and laid back with a sigh. "You go ahead. If I need you, I'll shout."

Choosing not to take any undue risks, Napoleon brought in the small plastic basin before putting on the tea water, his heart aching at Illya's forlorn pose as he left. *Is this how it will be for him from now on?* he wondered. *After every treatment, will he be so sick?* He wouldn't even allow himself to consider how such a constant strain would drain the Russian's already-minimal energy. He also tried to put aside his fears that Illya's care really might become too much for him, his needs more than Solo could provide.... As the whistling teapot brought him back to reality, Napoleon shook his head to put such dismal thoughts from his mind.

* * *

Though Illya ultimately spent much of the day in bed, alternately dozing and reading, his nausea did not return, and Napoleon was pleased when he ate two pieces of toast around two P.M. and kept them down. The worst part for Napoleon, in addition to watching his friend suffer, was not knowing what to do. While he longed to spend the entire day sitting at Kuryakin's bedside, he realized that was not a viable solution and ultimately settled for frequently "checking in." Nothing was mentioned of their previous night's discussion, and Napoleon was just as glad; with all his worry over Illya's physical condition, he hadn't had time to give his emotional state much thought at all.

"Think you can handle some chicken soup for dinner?" Napoleon posed the question around five P.M.. "I can't think of anything that would be more

bland yet nutritious. Can you?"

"No, that sounds fine." Illya patted the bed at his side. "Just a moment first, please, Napoleon?" he requested. "This will not take much of your time." Puzzled, Napoleon obeyed. "I have been doing a great deal of thinking about our conversation last night," the Russian said then, "as you also have, I'm sure. I only want to say that I do not expect you to have reciprocal feelings; I know that is not your way. Nor do I wish you to feel uncomfortable at any physical contact between us. Nothing shall happen, you have my word."

"But what if I want something to happen?" Napoleon smiled as the blue eyes flashed up to meet his. "You're right that I've been thinking about this, tovarich. It was all I could do not to come in and be with you this morning about five A.M. Because I've realized a few things, including the fact that you expressed feelings I've been repressing, or so it seems. If the dreams I was having last night are any indication — well, I'd like to have a whole lot more."

"Oh Napoleon, no," Illya murmured. "Please, don't do this. Don't force yourself to do this for me."

"I'm not 'forcing myself' to do anything, you stubborn Russian," Napoleon retorted. "You haven't been listening. I'm saying that I love you too. And I also think I want you — very much."

Though it was the farthest thing from his mind when he began talking, Napoleon was suddenly overwhelmed by an irresistible urge to kiss the full mouth so close below him, to erase the doubt from the troubled blue eyes. And when his head bent, as if of its own volition and he did capture Illya's soft lips, Napoleon couldn't stifle his groan of desire and need. His yearning deepened even more when the Russian's hands timidly found their way to his cheeks and molded around them, as if to bind their mouths together forevermore.

Napoleon was breathless when he finally broke away, staring at Illya through what he knew were passion-glazed eyes. Seeing the same unbridled need in his partner, it was all he could do to restrain himself, to keep from ravishing the younger man right then. Instead he forced himself to remember Illya's illness and weakened condition, and settled for another, more sedate kiss instead. This time Illya's arms went around his shoulders and drew him in tight.

"Napoleon, at this moment, even if you could

possibly be faking all this, I cannot ever thank you enough." Illya's voice was soft yet huskier than Napoleon had ever heard. "I have dreamed of your kiss so often, yet was so certain it could never be. If I were to die at this very moment, I could do so happily just for having known this."

"Don't say that," Napoleon said fiercely. "Don't even think it. You aren't going to die, not yet." He had to forcibly loosen his grip on the smaller man for fear of causing him harm. "There's too much ahead for us we haven't explored yet for you to even think about the end. This is the beginning for us, Illya. The beginning of our love."

He kissed Illya's lips once more. "But you won't have the strength to do anything if I don't feed you," he decided, moving back with reluctance. "So I'll go see about fixing our soup. Do you think you'd feel like sitting up for awhile if I helped you?" he asked hopefully. "It actually might do you good."

"Yes, it might," Illya agreed. "And I would like that." He reached up to touch Solo's face. "You are too good to me, Napasha. Much too good."

"Just wait until you get better," the senior agent countered, pulling back the Russian's covers and reaching for his robe. "I haven't told you yet about your fee for staying here. You won't think you're being spoiled then."

"Mmm, if it's anything like the sort of treatment you have shown me so far, it could become quite habit forming, I'm sure." Moving his leg carefully, Illya sat up on the edge of the bed and shrugged into his robe. "But I shall cross those bridges when I reach them," he decided, accepting Napoleon's hand to rise then taking the crutches he held out. "One step at a time is what the doctors advised me about my cancer. I believe that is good advice for you and I as well."

Unable to argue with that logic, Napoleon merely nodded his head in acquiescence then they headed for the kitchen then. Later Napoleon thought he could never recall having such a pleasant time as he prepared dinner, feeling as though life had suddenly taken a new, and nearly perfect turn. He refused to think of what lie ahead in terms of Illya's illness or even tomorrow; for one of the rare times in his life, he was content to live for what was happening right then. For the moment it was enough just to have Illya at his side.

Feeling somewhat strengthened after dinner, Illya challenged Napoleon to a chess match, which he won following a lengthy game. As had been the case the night before, Napoleon saw Illya's struggle to keep pace with him and the exhaustion in the pale eyes. After putting away the chess set, Napoleon stopped beside his partner with an exaggerated stretch and yawn.

"Since we have to be up at a decent hour tomorrow for your appointment," he said casually, "I think I'll call it a night. Aren't you about ready to turn in too?"

"Yes, I believe I am." Illya smiled as Napoleon retrieved his crutches from the floor. "Thank you. You are most handy to have around."

"On occasion." Napoleon waited as Illya got to his feet. "I'm glad you were feeling better this evening. I enjoyed our game. Even if you did manage to make me lose."

The good-natured banter continuing, Napoleon walked with Illya to his room then paused at the door. "What time do you want to get up, about seven?" He watched as Illya sat down on the bed. "I figured if we leave here at 8:30 we'll be fine."

"Yes, seven should be adequate." Illya looked over at Napoleon. "And what will you do while I'm in treatment?" he inquired, his eyes twinkling. "As if I didn't know."

"You think I'll go check up on Mark." Napoleon knew his partner's mind, his theory verified by a non-committal shrug. "Actually, I was thinking of doing some grocery shopping. Not even stopping at the office at all. We will need to eat, and I'm afraid if I show up there I won't get free until long after you're done."

"Which would be no major catastrophe, you know, Napoleon. The medical facility does have extra beds. Besides, they made me stay half an hour over last time, something about making sure I did not have an adverse reaction to the chemotherapy. It's entirely possible that may be standard procedure, I don't know."

"Well, I'd still rather be there when you are ready," Napoleon answered. "I can always wait with you if you need to stay. Won't you be having more appointments with your doctor too?" he inquired. "I just realized you haven't mentioned anything."

"Because I don't wish to think about it," Illya admitted, sighing. "Actually, I have one tomorrow,

shortly after my treatment, I believe. Dr. Lawrence said I should be able to graduate to a cane then and forget the crutches. That will be an immense relief."

"Yet there's something about the appointment you're still dreading." Napoleon came in to sit at Illya's side. "Can you tell me what?"

"He said by this appointment they should have a better idea how long I can expect to continue the chemotherapy treatments," the Russian answered, "and what the last x-ray series showed. They suspected the cancer had spread to the thigh bone, but that wasn't confirmed yet; tomorrow I should know. He will also explain more of the potential side effects of the chemotherapy to me then."

"I see," the senior agent nodded. "No wonder you've tried to forget. Would it help if I went with you?" he offered. "I'd be glad to, but I don't want to interfere."

"Napoleon, you could never interfere," Illya replied. "Not by caring. If you wish to attend, you are welcome to. I have no secrets from you, not any longer. Especially not after last night."

"Ah yes. Last night." Napoleon smiled softly at the memory. "Actually, this afternoon just before dinner was pretty nice also. Even better than last night in many ways."

Glancing over at his partner to gauge his reaction, Napoleon was surprised to find a hungry look in the Russian's eyes then, accompanied by a yearning he had never seen. Immediately Napoleon felt his heartbeat quicken in response. Though he tried to remind himself that Illya was tired, he couldn't help responding when Illya laid a hand on his upper thigh lightly, an innocent gesture yet a plea as well. Napoleon couldn't resist turning to gently grasp Illya's shoulders as his eyes searched the pale blue eyes.

"I love you, Illya," he murmured. "More than you'll ever know. And if you want the same things I do, I'd love for us to make love — all you have to do is say the word."

"Oh, I want you, Napoleon," the Russian assured him. "More than anything. But I am so afraid that I will be a disappointment to you, unable to fulfill your needs. You must know that I am not nearly so experienced as you."

"Experience doesn't matter, tovarich. Love does." Napoleon reached up to caress his face. "Besides, I'll take my chances. I'm willing to bet you're a lot more experienced than you give yourself credit for."

"Not with — another male." Illya seemed to struggle with the words. "I imagine you, like others, have thought that was my sexual inclination, but that has not been true. Except for you, I have never been attracted to another man, Napoleon. To be with you, as a lover, would be completely new for me."

Though Napoleon had never considered himself a romantic or one to be affected by romantic notions, Illya's last words all but melted his heart, and sent a surge of desire through his body stronger than anything he had ever known. While, like any man, he found it quite erotic to make love with a virgin, it had never been truly important to him before. Learning now that their love-making would be a first of sorts for Illya, Napoleon couldn't even put his feelings into words. He simply gathered the slighter form into his arms.

"God, Illya, I don't deserve you," he murmured. "To give yourself to me this way is — it's too good to be true."

"No, it is our mutual feelings that are beyond believing." Illya ran his hands along Napoleon's back. "To learn that you have feelings for me, even if they are born of pity, is still a dream come true."

"Illya, is that what you think? That I'm saying these things because I feel sorry for you?" Napoleon drew back, amazed. "It is, isn't it? You think if you weren't — under different conditions, I wouldn't feel this way."

His eyes averted, Illya shrugged. "I think it would be far less likely," he admitted. "Certainly I would have kept my secret from you."

"Oh, my foolish Illya," Napoleon murmured, again pulling him closer. "How wrong you are. It's true that I might not have realized my feelings without the extra motivation, but the feelings still were there. Just like my dreams. I've been having those for quite some time now; I simply refused to recognize them until last night."

Tired of talking, Napoleon chose a non-verbal form of communication, and bent his lips to Illya's, surprised by the Russian's hungry response. It seemed as though he was trying to devour Napoleon's mouth with his kisses, his tongue pressing at the slightly-parted lips. As he opened his mouth to permit entry by the starving invader, Napoleon felt his own response growing in his groin. He realized Illya's response was far less timid than it had been earlier, as though he too had grown more desperate as the hours had passed. Torn between knowing Illya's need for rest and his own desires,

Napoleon hesitated, debating what to do.

"It is all right. You do not have to pretend to want me." Illya's quiet words as they parted took Napoleon by surprise. "It is admirable that you have managed this much; you do not have to force yourself into anything more. I understand, Napoleon. It is all right."

"You understand what? That I'm dying to make love to every inch of your body and I'm afraid to?" Napoleon had no intention of letting the misunderstanding progress. "Because that's the hesitation you're sensing, nothing else. I want you so much it hurts, Illya, believe me. And if you don't, then feel for yourself."

Taking hold of the Russian's hand, Napoleon placed it over the bulge in his slacks then, his intent not even erotic but only to prove his point. Thus he wasn't prepared for his reaction when the long fingers gently pressed against him, tacitly exploring his length and girth much as a blind man would read a Braille book. The fact that he had invited this investigation did nothing to quell the desperate need which arose in his groin, and he bit back a groan.

"Mmm. Yes, it does appear you have something here in need of attention," Illya murmured, amusement in his tone. "Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps your needs are like mine after all."

"Oh? Does that mean you have a similar problem?" Boldly, Napoleon reached over to the Russian's lap, slipping his hand between the folds of Illya's robe. Through the thin pajama fabric he had no trouble locating Illya's erection, his slightest touch prompting the Russian to gasp. Reluctantly Napoleon withdrew his hand.

"Can I make a suggestion?" Solo asked sounding somewhat shaky. "Would you mind if we lay down? I don't know about you, but I know I'd be a lot more comfortable that way."

"I was wondering when you might suggest that," Illya smiled, his eyes sparkling. "It certainly sounds fine to me." Removing his hand from Napoleon's lap, he gave a wistful sigh. "I have an additional suggestion also — that you remove a bit of your encumbering clothes. You will be preparing for bed soon anyway, so it only seems logical that you begin now."

"Oh, of course," Napoleon agreed quickly. "Absolutely." There was no hesitation in his actions as he quickly unbuttoned and stripped off his shirt. "Of course, the same might apply to you," he added. "After all, it is your bed. The least you'd want to get

rid of is that cumbersome robe."

"Good point. Yes. I'll do that." Illya shrugged out of the sleeves, then paused. When Napoleon looked over at him, he saw that the Russian's expression had turned somber as the bright eyes fixed on his face. Napoleon stopped in the midst of undressing to cup Illya's cheek.

"What is it, tovarich?" he asked gently. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I simply — Napoleon, are you sure?" Illya swallowed hard. "Much as I would hate to ruin what we are finally sharing, I must be certain this is right for you. You are positive this is not something you are merely doing out of pity? To fulfill a dying man's wish?"

"Absolutely not," Napoleon assured him. "Why can't you just trust me on this? You can tell how much I want you. Why do you still have doubts?"

"I suppose because it all seems so incredible to me." Illya sighed and dropped his eyes. "Forgive me, Napoleon. I know I am being most difficult."

"No, you're just being more concerned for the other guy than yourself — like always." Napoleon leaned forward to place a light kiss on his lips. "Now, will you please shut up and get undressed?"

Left with no recourse but to laugh at that, Illya did as Napoleon instructed, though he kept his pajama pants on as he managed to hop up on one leg and pull the covers down on the bed. Following Illya's lead, Napoleon left his shorts on also, though even as he did, he wondered why. He was certain it wouldn't be long before they went the same route as the rest of his apparel — at least that was his fervent hope.

* * *

With clothing and covers aside, Napoleon and Illya wasted no time reclining on the bed together, Napoleon taking care to avoid Illya's injured leg yet striving to get as close to his friend as he could. Nuzzling the soft neck and kissing his way down the hairless torso, Napoleon couldn't shake a feeling of incredulous awe that it was Illya he was loving this way, though nothing had ever felt so right before.

Pausing at one tiny nipple, Napoleon took it between his fingers and teased it, mostly just to see what his partner would do, astonished when Illya gasped. Deciding the Russian must have liked the sensation, he moved to the other side and repeated

the action while lowering his head to lightly nibble at the first nub. He was amazed when Illya clutched at his head and moaned.

Though he enjoyed the action, Napoleon soon grew impatient and continued working his way down, kissing and nibbling along the flat chest and belly, relishing the sound of Illya's soft laugh. Keeping his hands busy also, Solo was careful not to apply much pressure to the sensitive thighs; instead he focused on the tender inner skin up high at the juncture of the Russian's groin.

Aroused all the more by the Russian's soft moans and labored breathing, Napoleon had to force himself to go slow when he reached his goal, deliberately toying with the dark gold curls. For a short while he actually tried to avoid the heavy shaft before him, focusing his attention everywhere else instead. It soon proved too tempting to resist, however, and he finally took it in his hand.

"Napoleon. Lyubovenka." Napoleon glanced up to find the Russian watching him, his bright eyes wide. "Please."

"Please what, tovarich?" Solo asked. "Do you need something?" He looked down at the hard, proud staff. "For you, my friend, anything."

Sensing Illya's need to be touched, Napoleon did his best to oblige him, running his hand up and down the blood-engorged length, marvelling as he did so at its size. Seeing a glistening dewdrop of moisture on the tip, he bent his head and touched the tip of his tongue to it, delighting in the slight salty taste. The sound of Illya's deep moan as he raised his hips toward Napoleon was all the encouragement Solo needed to continue on.

His movements were slow and deliberate yet enticing as he began to lick at the long shaft then, pausing to tease the underside of the swollen tip. Pressing his tongue in the spot where he himself most enjoyed pressure, Napoleon was rewarded by a Russian utterance he couldn't understand, telling him the act was right. Then he slowly licked down the underside and back up again with as much slowness as he could bear.

"Napoleon, please. You must — do something." It was the first time Napoleon had ever heard the Russian beg, and he relished the sound. "It feels wonderful, but I cannot bear too much more."

"I know, tovarich. Just a minute." Napoleon had one final act in mind. "I want you to enjoy this as long as you can."

"I am enjoying, but it is becoming agony also."

Illya groaned as Napoleon reached down to fondle his balls. "It has been — a very long time."

"So I'm getting the impression." Napoleon was awed by the weight of the massive orbs. "Just relax and take it easy. We're almost there."

Continuing to caress and knead the tight sac with one hand, Napoleon wrapped the other around the base of Illya's cock, dropping his head at the same time. As his mouth opened to take the soft head between his lips, licking at the slit as he did so, Napoleon began a slow pumping of the lower shaft as well. By the time his mouth and hand began working in tandem a few moments later, Solo knew that Illya was half out of his mind.

Napoleon was still kneading the heavy sac when he felt it begin to draw away from him, then heard Illya's sharp cry of "Napasha! Oh God!" Knowing the words to be ones of warning, Napoleon sucked at the flaming tip one last time then slid his mouth halfway down the now-throbbing shaft to await Illya's ultimate gift.

Which was not long in arriving. In seconds he felt the first creamy drops bathe the inside of his mouth, accompanied by another of Illya's cries. Reflexively swallowing, Napoleon took all his partner had to offer, savoring this first exchange of their love. He waited until he was sure the spent organ was limp before releasing it from his mouth.

Laying back on the pillow, Illya was still panting, his eyes closed and body limp, looking more beautiful to Napoleon than ever before. The older agent was still watching him when the blue eyes flickered open, instinctively coming to rest on Napoleon's face. Solo wasn't surprised to see that they were tinged with fear.

"That was beautiful, tovarich," Napoleon murmured. "You're beautiful." He reached to smooth back a lock of sweat-dampened hair. "I never imagined — even my dreams were never like this."

"As mine weren't." Still, Illya looked concerned and more than a little dazed. "You are even a more wonderful lover than I had expected. So tender, even with me. And your technique — that I do not think I wish to know where you have learned."

"Actually, I think you would wish to know that," Napoleon contradicted, chuckling. "Because the answer is — right here. Tonight. I've never been with a man before tonight either, Illya," he admitted. "When I made love to you — that was the

first time."

Hearing that, Illya paused, appearing deeply touched. "Then you are exceptionally gifted, my friend," he said finally, "because I have never been made love to so well in all my life. And while I cannot hope to do even nearly half so well for you, I very much would like to try. May I make love to you, Napoleon?" he asked shyly. "Please?"

"Take me, I'm yours." Napoleon spread his arms wide. "Only I think we need to make a little modification in positions so you don't hurt your leg. How about if you scoot over to the edge of the bed, this way —" He physically moved the light Russian over — "and I stand here by the bed like this? That way you'll have access to everything, yet all you have to do is sit up instead of trying to bend down or do some other kind of acrobatics. What would you say to that?"

"I would say that you are spoiling me again. Terribly." Yet Illya was smiling as he sat up, adjusting his position to be more in line with Napoleon. "I regret that you cannot be more comfortable, but I agree this way will be best. I shall be most relieved when my knee has mobility again, I can see that."

Having been stroking the front of Solo's muscular thighs as he was talking, Illya slid his hands around to do the back as well, pulling Napoleon in closer at the same time. Cooperatively moving nearer, Napoleon already had to make a conscious effort to control his breathing, Illya's mere touch sending shivers up his spine. Watching the golden head as it leaned in toward him took away what little remaining breath he had.

Then he felt the first timid touch of the sweet tongue on his body, and Napoleon gasped, barely able to remain standing as Illya's tongue gently laved his balls. Starting with the underside, he slowly lapped forward, came around to the other then worked his way back. By the time he finished Napoleon was sure he was on fire from head to toe.

Giving in to the temptation of exploring the soft silk hair, Napoleon had to concentrate in order not to pull it as Illya continued to make love to him with his mouth. His next act of drawing one full nut into his mouth, rolling and pressing, then switching to the other was nearly the end for Napoleon right there. At one point he actually had to grasp Illya's head and still it, his breathing ragged as he fought for control. He was certain he could feel Illya smiling when he finally released him, allowing him to

resume.

Illya's mouth was all that he had dreamed of in a woman but never found, that he already knew. As the Russian began to suck on the spongy tip, simultaneously licking at the slick slit, Solo moaned, knowing nothing had ever felt so good. Or tortured him so unmercifully.

His tongue and mouth still busy with the thick shaft, Illya's hands again came into action, one cupping the sagging balls and fondling as the other went around to Napoleon's butt. The senior agent groaned loudly as Illya began to stroke and squeeze his buttocks, prompting Napoleon to lean forward, further into the waiting mouth. The combination of all the sensations as his cock, ass and balls were all simultaneously stimulated quickly became too much.

"Illya? Oh God." Napoleon held tight to the Russian's head as the hot churning began. He couldn't remember ever having felt such an intense orgasm build so slowly as this one, liquid fire coursing through his balls and up into his cock. Then with one final sharp cry he stopped breathing and gave one last, furious thrust into his partner's mouth.

He felt Illya gag in reflex and he automatically pulled back a little, though the streams of fire continued to spew into Illya's mouth. Too far gone to hold back, he was completely taken over by the incredible climax until it was finally through, losing all awareness of everything else.

"Up here, Napoleon. Beside me."

Napoleon vaguely heard the words as his trembling knees began to collapse, unable to hold his weight anymore. Realizing that the Russian wanted him on the bed, Napoleon managed to hoist himself across the smaller man and collapse beside him, instinctively turning to enfold his friend. The two met with mutually open arms and an embrace tighter than any they had shared before.

Languishing in the afterglow of orgasm, Napoleon made no attempt to speak for a time. It was too pleasant just to lie where he was, savoring the warmth of his partner's arms. Until he felt the Russian shiver, and realized that he too was cold. Reaching down, he pulled up the sheet and blanket to cover them, stroking Illya's cheek as he returned.

"How can I ever thank you for the best night of my life, Illyusha?" he whispered. "I never dreamed it could be like this. Both the giving and receiving — it's wonderful. You said I was gifted at this, but I was nothing compared to you."

"Perhaps that depends on your point of perspective," Illya smiled, running a fingertip along Solo's jaw. "To me it all was beautiful. Even I am glad I was forced to share my secret now."

Unable to stifle a yawn before it escaped him, Illya looked embarrassed, but Napoleon only looked across him at the bedside clock then smiled understandingly. "It's late and you're tired," he said. "With good reason. I am too. I think maybe it's time we called it a night, don't you?"

"Yes, I do have my appointment tomorrow." Illya sounded displeased. "Thank you again, Napoleon," he repeated. "For everything."

"You're welcome. Thank you," Napoleon got up from the bed reluctantly, wishing he could stay yet sensing they weren't quite ready for quite such intimacy. "Sleep well, tovarich. And sweet dreams."

"I'm sure I shall have. Good night."

Collecting his clothes, Napoleon left his partner's room then, glancing back from the doorway to find the Russian's eyes closed and a soft smile on his face. Treasuring the look of peace and taking it with him, Napoleon went on to his room — he fell asleep with a contented smile on his face too.

* * *

Waking at his customary six o'clock hour the following morning, Napoleon was surprised how good he felt, as if the previous evening had given him a new lease on life. Wistfully wishing that were actually possible for the Russian, Napoleon sighed and headed for the shower, hoping the noise wouldn't wake his still-sleeping friend. He was pleased when he finished and a quick glance showed the Russian to still be in a state of sound repose.

After dressing and making his coffee as usual, Napoleon put on tea for Illya; hoping the previous day's nausea would not repeat itself. Waiting until precisely seven o'clock to go in, Napoleon carried a cup of tea with him, setting it on the dresser as he went to wake Illya up. Caught off guard, he gasped when Illya unexpectedly reached out from beneath the covers and grabbed hold of his neck, pulling him down.

"Ah ha! I've got you!" Illya's eyes were sparkling triumphantly. "I see I can still succeed with my old sleeping trick."

"Playing possum is the common term for it, and yes, obviously you can." Despite his grumbling tone, Napoleon was making no effort to get away.

"That's a mean trick to pull on your partner, though."

"I know. I'm sorry." Napoleon almost melted at Illya's faux repentant look. "How would you like me to apologize?"

"Well, I can think of several ways, but none that we have time for at the moment. So I suppose a kiss might do. At least it might be worth a try."

Apparently finding that punishment acceptable, Illya did indeed comply with the order, kissing Solo long and hard. Unable to resist the tantalizing temptation, Napoleon sank down on the bed beside his partner, wrapping him in a warm embrace as they kissed. By the time their lips parted Napoleon was heartily wishing Illya's appointment could be delayed at least until noon.

"Is that tea I smell?" Illya asked, sniffing. "Something certainly smells appealing, besides your aftershave."

"Yes, I brought you tea," Napoleon replied, sighing as he got up to retrieve it. "See? Already you have a personal slave. After you've been here a few weeks you'll probably have me bringing you breakfast in bed too."

"Well, that is one of the decadent American customs you have always favored." Illya feigned fright as Napoleon pretended to slap at his head. Holding the steaming tea cup and taking a sip from it, the Russian smiled broadly, clearly pleased. "Very good," he complimented. "You are learning. This is nearly perfect, in fact. I do believe I shall enjoy it here even more than I planned."

"Last night wouldn't happen to have anything to do with your feeling that way, would it?" Napoleon inquired coyly. "Your good night's rest, I mean? I thought that might be an added benefit."

"Indeed it is. As was what led to that wonderful night's rest." Napoleon saw his friend sober then as he looked up. "I don't have the words to thank you for that, Napoleon," he said softly. "I don't believe they exist. I only hope that you enjoyed it somewhat as much as I did — and that it can happen again."

"It can happen every day forever if I have my way about it," Solo replied without hesitation. "And yes, I did enjoy it just as much as you if not more. I can't begin to describe the feelings; I won't even try."

"Yes, I know the feeling," Illya nodded, sipping more tea. "In fact, if I did not have an appointment ... but alas, I do." He drained the tea cup, then set it on the bed side stand. "If you'll

excuse me, I must take a shower before we go."

"If you need any help, yell," Napoleon offered, handing the Russian his crutches. "I've been told I'm good at back washing too."

"I'm sure you are, and perhaps I shall find out — some other time. A time when we are not on a schedule like now." Illya rose to his feet with a sigh. "Thank you for the offer, but I'm sure I can manage. I shall be out soon."

Reluctantly accepting that they didn't have time for any further frivolity before Illya's appointment, Napoleon took the empty tea cup and left the bedroom with a sigh. Even if the future saw nothing more than sleep occur there, Napoleon knew the room would always hold special memories for him from then on. He only hoped they could make many more such memories together before Illya's final prognosis came to pass.

* * *

Keeping true to his word, Napoleon never entered the main part of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters when he left Illya for his treatment that day. Instead, after verifying that Illya's appointment with oncologist Dr. Jeffrey Lawrence was scheduled for three P.M., he left the building at once. Now more than ever he wanted to be certain nothing interfered with his attending the appointment with his friend.

After doing some of the required grocery shopping he'd mentioned, Napoleon busied himself around the apartment, changing Illya's bed and generally straightening up. It amused him to realize that he was behaving like a man preparing to impress a new lover, then realized that was essentially what he wanted to do. It still seemed impossible that his "new lover" was none other than Illya, yet he couldn't have been happier.

Returning to the hospital at 2:30 P.M., Napoleon entered the oncology area just as Illya was preparing to leave. With the Russian still on crutches, their trek was slow to Dr. Lawrence's nearby office, though they arrived well before the 3 P.M. appointment time. Both were pleasantly surprised when Illya was called in early, a rarity in the U.N.C.L.E. medical facility.

Though Illya was taken to an examining room and ordered to take his pants off, the nurse had no objection when Napoleon requested to stay. Ignoring Illya's blush as he undressed, Napoleon took possession of a chair in the corner, unobtrusively out

of the way but well within hearing range.

After the nurse took the usual vital information of weight, temperature and blood pressure, it was only a few moments before the door opened again. Much to Napoleon's surprise, the man who came in appeared little older than the two agents, and was scarcely taller than Illya in height. Though he wasn't sure why, Napoleon's initial instinct was to like the man very much.

"Good afternoon, Illya," Lawrence said pleasantly. "How's the knee doing today?"

"Better than I am with these crutches." Illya gestured toward Napoleon. "I'd like you to meet my friend and partner, Napoleon Solo. Napoleon, this is Dr. Jeffrey Lawrence, my oncologist, which, as you probably know, means cancer specialist."

"Pleased to meet you," Napoleon smiled, rising to shake the physician's hand. "I was out of the country when Illya had his surgery, so I'm trying to catch up now."

"That's good, Mr. Solo," Lawrence commended. "It always helps when a patient has interested family or friends. He told me a bit about you during your absence; I believe he said he'll be staying with you for a time?" Napoleon gave a confirming nod. "In that case, I'm very glad to have you both here."

He turned back to Illya. "I'm going to have Mr. Solo wait in my office while I do your examination," he stated, "then we'll all meet there. Is that all right?"

"Fine," the Russian nodded, casting Napoleon a cursory glance. "I'm sure he'd prefer to omit this portion anyway."

Making the wry face he knew his partner expected as he rose then, Napoleon followed the doctor's directions to his office down the hall. As he expected, it wasn't long before Illya and Dr. Lawrence came in as well.

"Good news," Lawrence stated as they entered. "He gets to try using a cane from now on. No more crutches."

Glancing at Illya, Napoleon saw his predictably delighted grin. "His knee has healed nicely from the surgery," the doctor continued, "though it will always have some stiffness, regrettably. We had to remove some of the muscle to get as much of the tumor as we did."

Napoleon saw the blue-gray eyes scan the top page in Illya's file before they raised again. "We've decided to try a three month regime of

chemotherapy," he stated. "Four days per week, every other week. The type of drugs you'll be receiving seem to be most effective on that sort of schedule, though we may go to every third week if they make you too ill. As I told you at the beginning, none of the chemotherapeutic agents are without adverse side effects."

"Yes, I recall you did say that," Illya nodded, "but other than nausea you didn't say what they would be. Since Napoleon is my care-taker for the moment, I believe he has a right to know what to expect with regard to my care."

"A very prudent observation, Mr. Kuryakin," Dr. Lawrence smiled. "Not to mention that you need to know yourself." He consulted the file again. "These particular drugs have a tendency toward nausea, as you mentioned, with ulceration being another major effect. That affects the mouth and gastrointestinal system primarily. I'll be sending home a prescription which should help counteract the nausea, at least to some degree."

"We also have to monitor your blood levels closely," he continued. "The one drug can reduce the number of white blood cells in your system as well as the platelet count. Obviously those are things we'll want to guard against and adjust the dosage if they should occur."

"One of the most potentially dangerous problems is something we call bone marrow depression." Lawrence looked from Illya to Napoleon then. "That is a condition in which the drug suppresses the body's ability to create bone marrow, resulting in a serious form of anemia which can lead to infection or severe bleeding, things like that. I'm hoping the dosage we'll be using won't cause that problem, but it is a possibility. We have to start the chemotherapy with quite high doses to achieve the maximum effect in initially slowing the cancer's growth. In your case, Illya, our goal is to keep it from spreading beyond the knee and thigh bone where we know it's already located; obviously that requires some very powerful drugs."

Jeffrey Lawrence looked between the two agents again. "Another effect is one of the most common — hair loss." He smiled as Napoleon inadvertently winced. "Yes, I agree with you, Mr. Solo; losing hair like Illya's is indeed a shame. Unfortunately there is no way around that and it will grow back once the treatments are stopped. The degree of loss varies from one individual to another so we can hope his case will be one of the mild

ones."

The doctor paused and sighed. "The last and most dangerous complication is something we call cardiac toxicity, which occurs after the drug has accumulated in the system for a time. We try to monitor the amounts of the drug very closely so this doesn't happen, but occasionally it slips in. What it means is that the drug can cause cardiac failure — heart failure — sometimes with so little warning that it becomes fatal before proper treatment can be applied."

"Well, can't you just a different drug on the cancer?" Napoleon asked, sitting forward in alarm. "It seems foolish to use something so dangerous."

"Yes, but you must consider the benefit of the drug as well as its negative aspects, Mr. Solo," Lawrence advised him. "For Illya's type of cancer, this is one of the two most effective drugs we have. Without it I would venture to say his chances of being with us six months from now would be slim to none."

Stunned into silence by that prognosis, Napoleon sat back, his dark eyes troubled as he glanced at his friend. Sitting quietly, Illya's hands were folded in his lap, his eyes focused on them, his face an unreadable, stoic mask. Though Napoleon longed to go to him and offer comfort, he remained in his seat, waiting for whatever more Dr. Lawrence had to say.

"Basically, I believe that's it, gentleman," the doctor concluded. "If you have questions, feel free to ask. I want to help you however I can. I'm sure Illya has explained to you that this is a particularly deadly form of cancer he's acquired, Mr. Solo," he added. "Even the chemotherapy offers no real hope of a cure. The best we can hope for is a slowing of the cancer's progression and metastasis to other areas."

"Those other areas," Illya spoke up then. "Where are they most likely to be? You said it has already spread from my knee to the thigh bone above it; where will it be most likely to develop next?"

"Traditionally it tends to favor the long bones of the body," Lawrence responded. "The favored spots appear to be the thigh, pelvis, and spine. Often the complications prove to be as much danger as the cancer itself, particularly the anemia as I've just discussed."

"I see," Illya nodded. "Thank you." He paused, again studying his hands. "With the chemotherapy and later possibly radiation, what are

my chances, Doctor?" he asked bluntly. "How long do you think I'll have? I know the prognosis for this particular cancer is poor and limited, but what does that mean in terms of time?"

"Anywhere from today to probably three years." Jeffrey Lawrence met Illya's gaze. "I won't lie to you, Illya — your survival rate for more than two years is slim. Yours is one of those unfortunate no-win cases, where if the cancer doesn't kill you the toxic effects of the chemotherapy treatments probably will. My best guess, considering the amount of thigh involvement at this point, would be from one to two years."

"Thank you. That helps a great deal." Illya drew a long breath. "I believe that answers all my questions for the moment. Napoleon?"

"No, I — I — Nothing." Still in shock from the prognosis he'd just heard, it was all Napoleon could do to speak past the lump in his throat.

"All right, then I suppose that's it for the moment," Dr. Lawrence decided, rising then reaching out to shake Illya's hand. "I'd like to see you again in two weeks after your treatment. We should have a better idea how things are affecting you by then. Though if you have any problems or experience any new symptoms, by all means call."

"I shall," Illya nodded. "Thank you." Leaning heavily on the cane, he turned toward the door. "I'll meet you at the elevator, Napoleon," he said to his partner. "I must make a stop."

Still numb, Napoleon nodded, his footsteps slow as he moved toward the door. "Thank you, doctor," he said finally. "Though I'm not sure exactly what for."

"It's difficult, I know, Mr. Solo," Jeffrey Lawrence said kindly. "And it will become even more so as time goes on. Mr. Kuryakin thinks a great deal of you, I know, so having you there will be a great boon to his morale. Attitude counts for a lot also, you know."

"Yes, I've heard that." Straightening his shoulders, Napoleon took a deep breath. "And since I'm all he's got I guess it's up to me to keep up his spirits. I just hope to God I can find a way to keep up mine."

Feeling another lump forming in his throat, Napoleon quickly exited the doctor's office, going to the elevator to wait for his friend. Due to his whirling thoughts it took him several minutes to realize Illya should have returned by then, and so went in search of his friend — the sight of the back

hunched over the sink in the men's restroom was already becoming all-too familiar after only two days.

* * *

Heading home as soon as Illya felt well enough to travel, Napoleon gave him the anti-nausea medication as soon as they arrived. Weakened from the lack of food and nausea, Illya collapsed on the couch where he spent the rest of the afternoon without stirring, his complexion wan. Though he tried to occupy himself in other parts of the apartment and not hover, Napoleon knew he must have checked on his friend at least a dozen times.

Resorting to chicken soup again for dinner, Napoleon was pleased when his partner ate, although his appetite was minimal. With repeated apologies, Illya went to bed shortly after dinner, too weary to even put up the pretense any more. Knowing they had the same routine to endure for the next two days did little to ease Napoleon's mind.

* * *

And indeed the routine changed little, with Illya continuing to be sick after his treatment each day. They quickly learned the trip home had to either be made immediately following the conclusion of Illya's chemotherapy treatment or postponed at least an hour, otherwise the Russian became violently carsick enroute. On Friday it was after four P.M. before they dared to leave the medical facility and drive home.

Suffering from constant exhaustion and unable to eat to regain his strength, Illya seemed to be literally wasting away before Napoleon's eyes. The already-loose clothing now was barely hanging on him, the blue eyes sunken into the depths of dark pits. As he helped his friend undress and crawl into bed upon their return home Friday evening, it was all Napoleon could do to hold back tears.

"I'll bring you some soup in a little while," he said softly, sitting down on the edge of the bed after tucking Illya in. "I think it might stay down better if you try to rest first, like you did last night. That seemed to work fairly well."

"Yes, I suppose." Illya's voice was spiritless. "As well as anything can."

"Hey, come on, don't sound so discouraged," Napoleon cheered him. "This is Friday night, you know. You don't have to go through any more of this

for a whole week. Once you have a chance to sleep in and rest up tomorrow, by Sunday you'll be good as new. And probably eating me out of house and home."

"Would you believe I actually wish that could really happen?" Illya smiled up at Napoleon sadly. "It would be nice to enjoy food again. It seems as if I have felt this way forever, not just a few days."

"I know. This has been hell for you." Napoleon ran a gentle hand along the cool cheek. "I wish there was something I could do."

"There is and you're doing it," Illya smiled, reaching up for Solo's hand and holding onto it. "You're here and putting up with me."

"That isn't doing anything," Napoleon scoffed. "That's a privilege. I wouldn't want it any other way." Spontaneously he kissed the Russian's hand, surprised by the hungry look which appeared in the soft blue eyes. "Ah, so you still like that, do you? Just wait — as soon as you're better I'll try kissing you other places that way. It'll be fun to watch you squirm."

Though he had hoped to cheer his friend with the teasing, Napoleon found Illya watching him with a sad expression instead. Reaching down to stroke his cheek, he answered the look with a quizzical expression then waited for a response.

"Did that one night really happen between us, Napoleon, or did I dream it?" Illya sounded wistful, his dispirited eyes searching Solo's face. "These days have been so long I have begun to wonder if that night was all in my imagination, if perhaps we never made love at all."

"Oh, it was more than your imagination, tovarich," Napoleon assured him. "And as soon as you're able I'll show you how good it can be again. Don't be so quick to give up on us, Illya," he added. "I haven't — and I never will."

Though Napoleon knew Illya was preparing to say something in response to that, another wave of nausea hit him just then, and all Napoleon could do was steady his shoulders while he retched. It was a physical ache to see his partner so pain-wracked and in such misery when all he could do was simply be there. By the time the spell ended, the Russian was so exhausted he could scarcely move, and Solo left him alone to rest.

It was a scene that repeated itself throughout much of that night and Saturday, though Illya was showing some improvement by Sunday afternoon. For the first time in nearly a week Napoleon fixed a

substantial dinner, delighted when his partner was able to join him at the table and actually eat as well. Though they did nothing more than quietly watch TV all evening, it felt like heaven just to have his friend back with him again.

* * *

Much to Napoleon's relief, each day that week saw the Russian improving, regaining his strength as he was able to eat more without the debilitating nausea. Though he still tired easily and slept long hours, by Tuesday he was growing restless as well. When Napoleon suggested they take a drive to the beach, Illya readily agreed.

With Illya's leg still too weak to tolerate much walking, they spent much of their time sitting on the surprisingly-warm sand. Often long periods of time would pass in total silence, each lost in their own reverie of thoughts. As much as he dared, Napoleon watched his friend discreetly, trying to memorize each precious detail about the man. It during one such time of observation that Illya happened to turn and look directly at him without warning — Napoleon had no time to hide his pensive gaze. Instead he could only flush with embarrassment at the realization he had been caught.

"Do not be ashamed of your concern, Napoleon," Illya told him with a soft smile. "I am flattered that you care so much. I only wish circumstances were not such that I must put you through this. Regrettably it seems that I have no choice."

"I wasn't regretting anything," Napoleon replied truthfully. "I was just thinking how much you mean to me. How much I've enjoyed our partnership. I was also thinking how glad I am I'm able to be with you now."

"Yes, I was thinking likewise," the Russian admitted, sighing. "Though I wonder how long either of us will feel this way. If I continue to be so ill from the treatments, and if all the other problems Dr. Lawrence described to us develop — if all that does happen, Napoleon, I want you to be reasonable and allow me to make other arrangements for my care."

"Other arrangements?" Napoleon echoed. "But why? I told you I want to be here for you and take care of you, especially now. Why it would be 'reasonable' for me to let you go somewhere else?"

"Napoleon, you heard Dr. Lawrence's"

descriptions of the possible symptoms. It sounds very likely that I would need constant care. I cannot expect you, nor do I want you, to sacrifice your career with U.N.C.L.E. just to become my nurse. You would come to resent the role and so would I."

"Illya, I could never resent you. For any reason." Napoleon reached out to lay his hand on the Russian's leg. "As for my career with U.N.C.L.E., right now I really don't give a damn. The only thing that matters to me is spending time with you, regardless of whether you're sick or well. I prefer we have more times like this than the other, but I'll settle for whatever I can get."

"You really are a stubborn Italian, aren't you?" Illya remarked, shaking his head but smiling just the same. "All right, then for now we shall not discuss this. I shall wait until — if — the time comes. Right at the moment I also prefer enjoying feeling semi-well."

"Semi well?" Napoleon repeated. "That implies something's still wrong. I thought things were going pretty well today."

"They are, all things considered." Illya rubbed at his stomach and made a wry face. "Unfortunately there are still problem areas too."

"The nausea?" Solo guessed, watching closely. "It's come back?"

Illya nodded, looking resigned. "I suspect it will never completely leave as I had hoped it might. I have been tapering off on my medication, but I suspect I shall have to take the full dose tonight."

"Oh God, Illya," Napoleon murmured, his eyes filled with sympathy. "This is so unfair."

"Yes, well, at least I'm still alive to experience all these things," Kuryakin responded. "At this point I believe that is preferable to the alternative. Do not feel so badly for me, Napoleon," he added more gently. "Without you all of it would seem far worse."

Touched by his partner's words, Napoleon lightly squeezed Illya's leg, and a short while later they began their slow trek back to the car. Though Napoleon suggested stopping midway, Illya typically refused, insisting he could go the rest of the way. It took all Napoleon's willpower to overlook how exhausted the Russian was, and how labored his breathing, when they finally did reach the car.

Due to stopping at a lovely ocean front restaurant for a dinner which seemed to sit surprisingly well with the Russian, it was evening when they arrived home, leaving Napoleon worried

the day might have been too long for his friend. Much to his surprise Illya still seemed in good spirits, however, and strangely reluctant to see the evening end. Finally, around ten P.M. it was Napoleon who gave in to his yawns at last.

"Maybe you have enough energy to stay up," he stated, "but I've had it. I'm turning in. Do you need help with anything before I go?"

"Help? No, not really." Napoleon noticed that Illya seemed evasive as he spoke. "Thank you very much for our trip today, Napoleon. It meant a great deal to spend time alone with you like that."

"Oh? Aren't we alone enough here to suit you?" Solo couldn't resist the teasing. "Somehow I thought this was about as private as we could get. It certainly suited our purposes well enough one evening, as I recall."

"Yes, I recall that evening also," Illya replied, looking and sounding wistful. "And yes, we are indeed alone here as well. It just seemed easier to discuss things there today somehow, though I am simply being foolish, I'm sure."

"No, it was very lovely," Napoleon agreed with him. "But I don't think all this is really what you want to say. There's something on your mind you aren't telling me tonight, tovarich," he prodded. "Come on, open up."

"No, it is nothing. Go on to bed. You are tired." Illya looked down at the floor. "It is time I went to bed also. I am sorry for keeping you up."

Reaching for his cane, Illya had just started to rise when the stick slipped from his grip somehow and dropped to the floor, Illya very nearly following suit. Had it not been for Napoleon's close proximity and quick action to grab him, Illya's leg almost certainly would have given way. As it was it took him several seconds of unsteady breathing to regain his balance, emotionally as well as physically, Napoleon suspected, as he continued to hold Illya upright. His own nerves shaken also, Napoleon slid his arms around the slender figure and pulled him close.

"That was almost a close call," he said, his voice still shaky. "Are you — is your leg all right?"

"Thanks to you, it is fine. Yes. Thank you." Illya leaned his forehead against Solo's shoulder heavily. "I am sorry to have been so clumsy. It is good you were here."

"Right where I want to be," Napoleon smiled, hugging him close. "And also where you want me — I hope."

"Oh, yes, I do want you," the Russian murmured, lifting his head to meet Solo's eyes. "More than you can ever know."

"Mmm. I see. Well, I think you're giving me a good idea." Napoleon reached up to gently touch the slightly flushed face. "What would you say to continuing this discussion somewhere more comfortable?" he suggested. "Like my bed?"

"I would say that sounds like what I have been hoping to hear all evening." Illya blushed as Solo's eyebrows raised. "I know it is brazen of me, but this is the first evening I have felt better enough to attempt something with a reasonable certainty of success."

"So why didn't you say something instead of making me wonder what you were keeping from me?" His arm still around Illya's waist, Napoleon bent to retrieve the fallen cane. "Much as I'd like to, I still can't read your mind, you know."

"I'll bet you do a reasonable job of doing so later," Illya responded, his eyes now twinkling brightly. "Come along. Let's put your observatory powers to the test."

Slipping his arm around Napoleon's waist, Illya bypassed the use of the cane, continuing to lean on his partner instead. As they progressed down the hallway, Napoleon smiled as they passed the door to Illya's room, grateful for the chance to get the Russian into his own, larger bed at last. Later, if things worked out at all as he was hoping, they might never have to spend their nights apart again.

* * *

Neither spoke during their brief walk to the bedroom nor as they quickly undressed, the silence feeling comfortable rather than strained. Napoleon sensed they were both more at ease this time with what they knew would happen, yet still new enough with each other to be a little shy. For himself, it was all Napoleon could do to keep his erection under any semblance of control, he was so eager to make love to his friend. Then he finished undressing and turned to find the Russian watching him with a look of love that literally took his breath away.

"God, Illya, I love you." The words escaped his lips before he even knew he was about to speak, emerging as he stepped over to take the smaller man in his arms. "I don't what I ever did to deserve having you look at me like that, but whatever it was I'd do it over a thousand times. I love you so much

I can't even — there aren't even words."

"As I feel for you," Illya responded, running his hands over Solo's bare chest. "Come, let us lie down and be comfortable. Tonight I hope to make things much better for you than I did during our previous time."

And though Napoleon's silent response to that was the thought of *Impossible*, he quickly discovered the Russian meant exactly what he said. From the moment Napoleon lay down he found his body being showered with gentle nips and sucks and kisses, laved with a hot, gentle tongue. In seemingly no time at all he was unable to lie still as his body burned with an agonizing need for the release he so desperately craved.

The release Illya was deliberately denying him, and forestalling. Napoleon moaned as the Russian sucked on one of his balls again. By carefully maneuvering his injured leg, Illya was able to stay beside his partner this time, the blond head centered at the juncture of Napoleon's thighs. With each light caress of Illya's fingers or a stroke of his tongue across the tip of his turgid penis, Napoleon grew more certain he couldn't bear a moment more.

"Illya, please," he begged at last. "Take me." Desperate, he arched his hips and caught hold of the golden head to guide it toward his needs. "Please?"

Apparently letting actions speak in lieu of words for him, Illya reached up and removed Napoleon's hands, patting them as he laid them at Solo's sides. "Soon, my love," he whispered. "I promise." He reached down to fondle the heavy balls. "I assure you, this will be worth waiting for."

Then Illya's head slid still further downward and he began to nibble at the sensitive skin of Solo's upper thighs, an act Napoleon had never found arousing before but which suddenly drove him mad. Raising his hips and moaning, he was barely aware when Illya slid his hands around to begin kneading his butt ever so gently, or when he lifted the undulating hips still more. He was acutely aware, however, of the moment the Russian opened his mouth and took almost the full length of his cock into his mouth and throat and began sucking on it — in response to that, Napoleon gave a strangled half-scream as his climax began instantly. Consciousness all but vanished as he gave himself to his partner time and time again.

Reality returned with the awareness of a head lying on his shoulder, of gentle fingers lightly caressing his chest. Still unable to move or open his

eyes, Napoleon managed to wrap his arms closer around his friend. Savoring the afterglow, Napoleon knew this experience had been even better than their first time, and idly wondered if it would continue to improve each time. Then he heard Illya sigh softly, a sound which returned him to the present and forced him to open his eyes. He sighed as well.

"I don't know how to thank you for that, or tell you how much I enjoyed it." He stroked the incredible softness of Illya's hair. "I thought the last time we did this was perfect, but obviously I was wrong."

"It was most enjoyable for me also," Illya said shyly. "I enjoy pleasing you a great deal. You are a very easy man to love."

"Just as you are." Napoleon ran his hand over the smooth chest, pausing at the left nipple to rub and tease. "Is there anything you'd like me to do different this time?" he questioned. "My primary goal is to please, you know. If there's anything you'd like me to do differently, don't hesitate to let me know."

"Last time was exquisite," the Russian replied, his eyes already closed as Napoleon ministered to him. "I do not know how one would improve on perfection. Which that was."

"Perfection? No, I think you were just horny," Napoleon teased him, his fingers moving over to focus on the other nipple now. "Maybe this time you won't be so bad."

"Oh, you think not? I am not so certain." Illya blushed as he glanced down at himself. "It seems all you need to do is get near me with these intentions and I become more needy than I have been in all my life."

"Really? I'm flattered." Napoleon bent his head then to lick at a nipple, secretly pleased to hear his partner's gasp. "I still think there must be something you'd like I haven't done yet, though."

"Napoleon, truly — all I want is for you to love me." Illya's words were soft and sincere. "It is far more than I ever dreamed of having, and the fulfillment of all my dreams. What you did before was exquisite, as is what you are doing now. Your touch is all that I need, now or ever. Just do whatever feels right."

Aware he would not receive any more specific guidance, Napoleon gave a mental shrug and surrendered, hoping his partner really meant what he said. Limited in his knowledge of homosexual love-making, Napoleon wasn't sure what he could do

differently than he had before. Consequently he chose to follow his instincts and Illya's reactions, and set about making love to his partner once more.

As had been the case their first time together, Illya seemed to have limited tolerance for Napoleon's tender foreplay. Soon he was squirming and arching his back, his hands groping at Napoleon's head and shoulders, wherever he could reach. His erection clear testament to his need and desire, Napoleon prolonged the agony as long as he could then gave in to his friend's silent pleas. He was pleased that he was able to take more of the long shaft inside his mouth this time than he had before.

Again he found the Russian's balls tight and heavy, and sensitive. As he fondled and rolled them, Illya's moans increased in volume correspondingly. When he combined that action with a gentle suckling of the swollen tip, Illya whimpered, a sound Solo knew he had never heard from his friend before. Sensing its meaning, Napoleon made his suckling more purposeful.

His reward came just a few moments later, heralded by Illya's sharp cry of his name. Ready and waiting as he had been the first time, Napoleon again drank his partner's creamy offering. He was certain he had never known a sweeter or more poignant time.

Predictably spent and exhausted, Illya did not speak or move for several minutes following his climax, instead falling back onto the pillow and remaining there. Satisfied the explosive orgasm was over, Napoleon moved up beside him, gently moving the pliant body onto his shoulder and cuddling it there. Resting his cheek against the soft hair, Napoleon closed his eyes and relaxed there contentedly.

"At last I understand it." The Russian's quiet words brought Solo from a state of near-sleep. "All these years I have wondered what it was that made you such a great lover. Now, at last, I know."

"Oh? And what might that be?" Napoleon couldn't resist prodding when Illya stopped. "And how do you know I make love to everyone the same way?"

"That I don't know," Illya confessed, grinning. "But I would suspect your tenderness doesn't change. It is that which keeps you so in demand, without question. No one has ever been so gentle with me as you."

"I don't think I've ever been this gentle," Napoleon admitted, surprised to realize the truth of

his words. "It's a feeling you bring out in me somehow. For a long time when we first became partners I remember I felt protective toward you; maybe this is sort of the same. All I know is that it's important to me you enjoy what we're sharing. That's all that matters to me."

"As if it were possible for me to feel otherwise," Illya smiled, running his hand over Solo's chest. "Now, unromantic as this sounds, did you bring my cane with you? I need to — excuse myself."

"Oh. No. I didn't bring it. But I'll get it. Hang on." Already the senior agent was out of bed. "I'll be right back."

Though Napoleon saw the Russian's mock salute as he departed, Napoleon chose to ignore it as he quickly retrieved the forgotten cane. While he would have preferred to just assist his friend when he needed to be mobile, Solo knew Illya could never stand such dependence for long. Consequently he returned to deliver the cane with a bow.

"Your trusty aide hath returned to you," he said with mock servility. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"Not for the moment," Illya replied, taking the cane and rising. "Excuse me, please."

Though he was a little surprised by the haste with which Illya departed, Napoleon thought little of it at the time — until a soft moan filtered through the bathroom door. Rushing in, Napoleon found his friend leaning against the sink, his face pale and arms wrapped around his waist. His heart sinking as he recalled Illya's earlier bout of nausea, Napoleon came up and wrapped the Russian in his arms from behind.

"Where's your medication?" he asked. "Did you take it?" He felt the fair head nod slightly against his chest. "Good. Were you actually sick?" The head shook negatively this time. "That's good too. Then probably the best thing is to just try to relax now. Do you want to go back to bed?"

"It might be more comfortable," Illya admitted, sounding reluctant. "I am sorry for this, Napoleon. It seemed to come on faster than usual this time."

"Probably too much exertion." Napoleon slowly helped his friend to stand, at the same time chiding himself for not being more aware of the situation or taking more care. "Here, give me the cane and hang on to me."

As they had done previously, the pair made their way from the bathroom carefully, only going the opposite direction this time. It was only as

Napoleon eased Illya down on the bed that the blue eyes looked up with a start. "Napoleon, this is your bed," he protested. "I cannot stay here the entire night."

"Why not? It's plenty big for both of us." Solo sat down at his side. "This is something I've been wanting to talk to you about anyway, tovarich. I don't want to be without you at night anymore. Unless you think you wouldn't be able to sleep well, I'd like to have you sleep in here with me from now on."

Clearly surprised by the proposal, Illya remained silent for several moments, wincing as he wrapped an arm around his waist and squeezed. Finally he raised his eyes to his friend. "I suppose we could try it," he decided, sounding reluctant. "Though I don't know that it will work. I have never — I'm sure this sounds foolish to you, but I have never slept with anyone before."

"It doesn't sound foolish," Napoleon smiled. "In fact, I'm honored. At least you're willing to try it with me. Unless you think you'd be more comfortable alone," he added. "I don't mean to make you any more miserable than you already are."

"Actually, the idea sounds quite lovely," Illya admitted, blushing as he looked down. "I enjoy being close to you. When I am so ill, however, during my treatments, I doubt we will be able to stay together then."

"Don't be so sure," the senior agent responded. "That's when I want you close most of all. But we can work that out when the time comes," he compromised. "For now let's just see what happens tonight. Is your medication taking effect yet? Do you think you might be able to sleep?"

"Yes, I believe the pain is somewhat better," the Russian nodded. "And I am quite tired as well. Whenever you are ready we can turn out the light."

"Okay, well, let me make a quick trip in here," he gestured toward the bathroom, "then I'll be right there. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable."

Silently delighted he had won the victory with such ease, Napoleon hurried through his nightly routine in the bathroom, eager to return to his friend. Emerging from the bathroom he had to stop and smile, however, the sight of the already-sleeping man tugging at his heart unlike anything he'd known before.

No doubt about it, I'm in love with him, he thought, shaking his head in amazement. In love with a blond male. I never thought I'd see the day.

Yet in his heart he knew that "day" had been coming all the years they had been partners — it had simply taken a crisis to open his eyes to reality.

Crawling into bed carefully so as not to disturb his resting partner, Napoleon fell asleep almost instantly, enjoying the most restful night's sleep he had known in some time. He felt as though he had everything he could need with Illya there so close beside him, his world consisting of the Russian he had grown to love. For the first night Napoleon's dreams were not filled with death and dying either — they held only his and Illya's love.

* * *

Much to Napoleon's delight Illya did not protest their new sleeping arrangements the following morning, but rather professed to have slept better than he had in some time. He also initiated the most slow and tender time of love-making the two had shared thus far, which seemed to set the mood for the entire day. It was his first day completely free of illness, in which he seemed nearly his old self again.

With the rest of the week following suit, the two agents relished their free time, spending time at museums, on long, leisurely walks, and still more time in bed. With each day Napoleon found himself falling ever more deeply in love with his partner, treasuring each moment they shared. He refused to let himself question Illya's feelings, preferring to believe that Illya loved him as well. Certainly there was nothing lacking in their love-making — each time grew more special than the time before.

All too soon Monday morning arrived, however, and the resumption of Illya's chemotherapy, which Napoleon knew would likely bring a dramatic change to their peaceful routine. As he left Illya in the medical section shortly before nine A.M., Napoleon had difficulty keeping the smile painted on his face, knowing what lay ahead.

* * *

Curious to see how his successor was faring, Napoleon headed for his former office when he left Medical. He was surprised not to feel even a twinge of regret or nostalgia as he walked the long hallways, no twinge of desire to return. He even felt happy to see Mark Slate poised behind his desk.

Clearly pleased to see the senior agent, Slate immediately engaged Solo in conversation, seeking

his advice on several matters of which he felt less than sure. Of utmost concern was the fact that Alexander Waverly was pressing him to replace Illya Kuryakin, to name a replacement second-in-command for Section Two. Though he knew it was a necessary procedure, Napoleon too was less than pleased.

"It has to be done," he sighed finally. "There's no point in putting it off. From what the doctor told us, he's definitely not coming back to work, and the position does have to be filled. April is next in line for the job, and I think she'll do it well."

Before he spoke Napoleon knew Slate would be pleased by the praise for his female partner, as well as relieved to have her working with him again. Mark smiled his gratitude. "Thank you," he said. "I know this can't be easy for you. You and Illya have been together a long time. It won't be the same working with April when you come back, I know."

"Well, that won't be for awhile," Napoleon replied, then noted the Brit's look of surprise. "The doctor said Illya probably has at least a year or two left. April will be ready for my job by then."

"Do you mean you aren't coming back until — while — as long as Illya needs you?" Mark stumbled over the words. "The Old Man told me Friday you'd only be off another couple weeks."

"Hmm. Yes. I guess that's what I implied when I left." Napoleon kept his eyes lowered evasively. "That was before I realized how much care Illya would need, though. Now that I do know — there's no way he can be left alone."

"Napoleon, I admire your loyalty to your friendship and all that," Slate responded, "but have you really thought this through? I'm not sure the old man will even consider what you're suggesting, especially not for that long. Besides, are you sure you can devote that much time to Illya?" he asked bluntly. "To the exclusion of your own life?"

"Mark, without Illya I don't have a life," Solo stated, his brown eyes steady as he met those of the younger man. "The only thing that matters to me right now is being with him, for however long he has and whatever it takes. If Waverly wants to fire me, so be it. You can do this job as well as I can, and I can always find work somewhere else."

Appearing uncomfortable with the discussion, Mark only nodded in lieu of responding, and in a short while Napoleon left. Disturbed by the conversation, Napoleon spent a long while in an unused conference room just thinking, wondering if

the younger agent could possibly be right.

There were drawbacks to the isolated life he was choosing, but Napoleon already knew that. He also knew it was worth the sacrifice to be with Illya in his final days. He knew as Illya's illness progressed things would get harder for them, that even their love-making would likely end. But none of that mattered to Napoleon any longer — his sole concern now was spending whatever time Illya had, regardless of his health, at the Russian's side.

* * *

After a light lunch in the hospital cafeteria, Napoleon steeled his nerves and set out for Waverly's office, feeling more trepidation as he approached than he had since his earliest days in Section Two. He already knew the old man would not approve what he was about to propose to him, and though he knew he still had two weeks remaining of his current leave, he saw no point postponing the inevitable. He squared his shoulders and tried to look casual as he entered the inner sanctum he knew so well.

"Ah, Mr. Solo. A pleasure to see you." Napoleon was surprised to see the old man appear sincere in his words. "It has not been the same here without you and Mr. Kuryakin here to grace our halls."

"Why, thank you, sir. I'm honored." Which, much to his surprise, he was. "It's seemed rather odd being away also, but we've had other matters to occupy our time, I'm afraid."

"Yes, I'm sure you have. How is Mr. Kuryakin faring these days? I've not had time to check in with his doctors yet this week."

Briefly Napoleon reported on his partner's condition, stressing the severity of his illness following the chemotherapy treatments and the extent of his required care. As he finished, he looked up to meet his superior's eyes. "That's largely why I'm here, sir," he concluded. "To request an extension of my leave of absence, indefinitely. Considering the doctor's prognosis and Illya's likely forthcoming problems, there's no way he can be on his own. I want to be there."

"Even to the detriment of your future career, Mr. Solo?" Waverly asked bluntly. "For that may well be the choice you'll be forced to make — Mr. Kuryakin or your career here with us. As I told you at our previous meeting, I cannot afford to have both

of my top Section Two agents off duty. We cannot function efficiently that way. I just told Mr. Slate last week that he needs to name a successor for Mr. Kuryakin's position since it's quite obvious he won't be back."

"Yes, Mark and I discussed that this morning. I think he'll have April's official papers on your desk within the next few days. She'll be able to fill the position well."

"And do you feel Mr. Slate can fill your position as head of Section Two likewise?" Napoleon understood that Waverly was not talking in temporary terms. "He has done quite well so far, but permanently I'm still not confident how his performance will be."

"He'll do fine, sir," Napoleon replied, his tone even. "I have every confidence in his ability." He paused. "Does that mean my request for an extended leave of absence is being denied?"

Much as he hated to see the gray head nod in the response he knew was inevitably coming, Napoleon kept his gaze on his superior, surprised by the older man's delayed response. Instead of the quick comeback Solo had been expecting, Waverly appeared torn over what to say. Finally, slowly, he laid his pipe down on the desk and raised his eyes to meet Napoleon's.

"You are my best agent, Mr. Solo," he said at last, his tone somber. "I have always expected you to become my successor one day. And it is that fact which has me so concerned now. Filling your position on a temporary basis, even for a year, I could easily work with. It is my fear of what would occur if something happened to me that prevents me from simply granting your request. I am not a young man, as you well know, Mr. Solo. I need whoever is to step into my shoes available at all times."

Thoroughly taken aback by that bit of news, Napoleon simply stared at his superior for several moments, unsure what to say. Though he had often privately entertained the idea of being Number One, Section One someday, it was not something he had really thought might come to pass. Hearing now that he might be giving up such a dream forever gave him pause.

"You need not make your decision right now, Mr. Solo," Waverly told him, interrupting his thoughts. "You still have this week and next remaining of your current leave of absence, you know. Why don't you give a bit of thought to what we've discussed here then come and see me again

next week? Mr. Kuryakin might have some thoughts on the matter if you discuss it with him as well."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Napoleon knew he was being dismissed and rose from his chair. "I'll be in touch."

His thoughts disturbed as he left Waverly's office, Napoleon wondered how he could keep this latest bit of news from his friend. To "discuss" the subject with Illya would be futile, he already knew that; if the Russian knew what was involved he would insist that Solo return to work at once. Resolving to do his best to keep his feelings secret, Napoleon headed for the medical section where he sat out the remaining time of Illya's treatment in an isolated waiting room, lost in thought.

* * *

Much to Napoleon's chagrin Illya's sickness from the chemotherapy began immediately this time, not even giving him that first Monday evening on reprieve as it had before. Knowing the rest of the week would be much the same, Napoleon saw to his partner's care without complaint or protest, often anticipating his needs before they even occurred. Though Illya would occasionally protest that Napoleon was being too good or doing too much for him, most of the time he was too ill to do anything more than survive. It broke Napoleon's heart to be able to do so little for him other than simply be there.

On hand for Illya's appointment with Dr. Lawrence Friday afternoon, Napoleon was not surprised to hear that his friend was now slightly anemic, or that there were signs of the gastrointestinal ulcers mentioned before. His hope that the oncologist might decide to spread the treatments to once every three weeks was not granted, however, and they returned home with even more medication for Illya than before. Looking at the frail Russian in bed beside him that night, Napoleon wondered how much longer the younger man could survive agony such as he had endured all that week.

But thanks to the medication and Illya's sheer willpower, he was much improved by Monday again, a pattern Napoleon suspected would hold true as long as he had to take the chemotherapy. Again they spent their time together in pleasant activities, such as long drives and short walks along trails or on the beach. Along with Illya's restored health, their

love-making flourished as well.

True to his resolution, Napoleon said nothing of his impending decision to his partner, forcibly keeping his mood such that Illya never suspected anything of being on his mind. He was surprised how tempted he was by Waverly's proposition, even to the point of considering hiring a private nurse for Illya so that he could return to work. Though he knew his partner would never object and would in fact approve such a decision, something continued to hold him back.

It's because you want to do everything for him yourself, just to prove that you can do it. Napoleon knew that was at least part of his rationale. *You don't want to believe anyone else can take care of him as well as you can, to admit you do feel a little trapped.* Despite their truth, he persistently pushed such thoughts from his mind.

* * *

By Wednesday of the second week the stress of the imminent decision was beginning to wear on the senior agent, even to the point of disrupting his sleep more than Illya's illness already did. When 5 A.M. Thursday morning found him pacing around the apartment, Solo knew something had to be done — he sat down at the kitchen table with an early morning cup of coffee and dropped his head to his hands.

He was startled when, a short while later, two hands came to rest on his shoulders and began gently massaging his tense neck, an act which felt so good he leaned into it and sighed. Though he knew Illya had been up much of the night again, Napoleon selfishly didn't want to send him back to bed just yet. Instead he allowed the massage to continue silently.

"You have had something very important on your mind these past days, my love," Illya said softly, still rubbing. "I have tried not to pry into your business, but it is apparent that you are disturbed. Is it perhaps the fact that your leave of absence is nearly over? That next week you are due to return to work? You may think that I have forgotten the terms of your time here with me, but indeed I have not."

"You never forget anything," Napoleon replied, knowing now he could not lie. "You're like an elephant." He reached up to cover Illya's hands with his. "You're also too damned perceptive sometimes.

Yes, that is what I've been thinking about, if you must know. I have to give Waverly a decision tomorrow as to whether or not I'm coming back. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I don't know what to do."

"What is there to be ashamed of? Though of course you are going." Illya dropped into the chair at Napoleon's side. "I told you at the beginning I did not want you taking care of me if I became ill from the treatments, and this is even worse than I had thought it might be then. I think it will be best for us all if I simply return to the intermediate care level at the hospital where people will be paid for cleaning up after me."

"No! Absolutely not." Napoleon's tone was fierce. "No matter what else happens, you are not leaving here. If I decide to go back I'll hire a day nurse to be with you until I get home at night. That way we could still be together, at least."

"But your rest and all the work that would still mean for you," Illya protested. "Napoleon, you are being foolish. My care is becoming too much. You could not possibly work at U.N.C.L.E. all day then expect to stay up with me until of the night too. You would be in the hospital suffering from exhaustion in no time at all."

"All right, then, I'll tell Waverly I just won't go back," Solo decided. "I'll tell him to designate Mark or someone else as his replacement if that's what he wants. That's the whole problem, you know," he added. "He wants me as his replacement and he's afraid I wouldn't be there in case something happened to him. It's academic since he'll probably outlive us all anyway, but that was what he told me when we talked last time."

"Napoleon. You would be Number one, Section one?" The Russian sounded truly awed. "That is what you would be giving up? For me?"

"No, that's what he claims I'd be doing," Napoleon corrected. "It'll never happen anyway, like I said. It was just a scare tactic he was using, I'm sure."

"Well, scare tactic or not, that is a chance you must not be taking," Illya said firmly. "Now I know you are going back to work. If you insist I will hire a nurse companion, but they will be full time and 24 hours, at least during the weeks when I am so ill. And I will return to the other bedroom those weeks also," he added firmly. "It is imperative that you get your rest when you must work."

"And on those weeks when you aren't so

sick?" Napoleon asked, his eyes twinkling. "Will you sleep with me then? You never know what might crop up that needs attention then too."

"Oh, how poetic we are this morning," Illya retorted, his tone dripping sarcasm. "I believe we can negotiate that when the time arrives, though I'm certain something can be arranged. As long as I have your agreement that you will tell Mr. Waverly you're returning to work."

"It's really important to you, isn't it?" Solo asked, studying the pale face. "You'd like me to be Number One."

"Frankly, yes. Because I know you would be perfect for the position." Illya rubbed his stomach then, and winced. "Now if you will excuse me, I believe I hear my antacid and pill bottles calling. Pardon me."

Though his heart ached as he watched the Russian's slow departure, Napoleon realized his mood was much lighter for the decision having been made. Despite his many misgivings about the wisdom of his decision, he knew Illya would have it no other way now that he knew the truth. And in his heart Napoleon knew it was also what he wanted and needed; he only hoped he would have enough energy to devote to both Illya and the job.

* * *

And despite the full-time, round-the-clock nurses they hired, the ensuing weeks challenged Napoleon's fortitude many times. Particularly when Illya took a sudden turn for worse from the chemotherapy after his platelet count dropped to a dangerously low level and he nearly bled to death from a seemingly minor cut one night. After he was released from the hospital following that incident, it took Napoleon weeks to feel comfortable leaving his friend in the care of a stranger again. Yet at Illya's insistence he did so, all the while wondering why. In light of the Illya's deteriorating condition it all began to seem very futile to Solo somehow.

It seemed like Dr. Lawrence continued the chemotherapy regime forever, though in reality it was only the normal course of the drug therapy. During the six month duration Illya suffered all the negative effects Lawrence had initially predicted, except the dreaded cardiac toxicity. Ironically the most mild effect was that of hair loss — at the end, most of his silky blond strands remained intact. Though even that did little to make him feel less miserable.

Yet after the treatments were over, and during the rare times Illya felt well enough to pursue making love, Napoleon knew why they both hung on, knowing their love was even stronger than Illya's pain. Often Solo wondered if he was being selfish by wanting Illya to continue suffering the agony of the treatments, yet knew he wasn't ready to part with his friend. And never once did he hear Illya give any indication of giving up.

Then finally, after nearly six months, the chemotherapy ended, an immense relief to them both. Illya even remained cheerful throughout the extensive testing Dr. Lawrence conducted two weeks later to determine the state of his cancer by then. Napoleon was surprised that when the time came to receive the results of that testing, Illya was not looking forward to the appointment, almost as if he was afraid of what he might hear. Knowing the Illya needed his moral support, Solo took the day off to go with him — and to hear the prognosis first-hand for himself.

As they sat in the waiting room prior to being called in for the appointment, Napoleon was surprised to see his partner actually fidgeting, conveying just how nervous he was. Already having been snapped at by Kuryakin several times that morning, Solo knew better than to make note of his observations then. Instead he sat quietly, longing to take Illya's hand in an attempt to soothe him, but in reality doing nothing at all.

When they finally were shown in to Jeffrey Lawrence's office, Napoleon wished they had remained outside, one look at the doctor's expression telling him the news was not good. Though the physician met Solo's eyes for the briefest of moments, it was long enough to send Napoleon's heart plummeting down.

"You're looking well, Illya," Lawrence remarked, smiling. "How are you feeling now that you've had some time to recuperate?"

"Much better, thank you." Illya sat stiffly in the chair. "It is quite a relief not to feel so ill most all the time."

"Yes, you did have a rough time of it. I'm sorry for that. Though of course you knew we had to try. And while it does seem to have destroyed most of the cancer cells in the knee area, I'm afraid these latest tests show something new." He paused. "The cancer has metastasized to your lower spine, Illya," he said softly, "and probably the pelvis as well. I'm sorry to be the bearer of such bad news."

"Just as I am sorry to hear it." Illya's voice

was low, and quietly controlled. "Though I now understand the back pain I have experienced recently and — other areas too." He closed his eyes then and swallowed hard before looking up at the doctor again. "Am I correct in presuming there will be no treatment this time?" he asked, his voice only slightly unsteady. "Certainly you cannot do more chemotherapy so soon."

"No, though we could try radiation," Lawrence offered. "On the spine, at least. Unfortunately we have not had a great deal of experience with the side effects of radiation so near the male reproductive organs, though I suspect it would cause impotence if not other urological problems as well. Given the nature of your cancer, I'm not sure I would recommend it myself."

"Yes. I agree with you." Illya nodded, his voice hollow. "It is simply a matter of time, then. Have you any idea how long?"

Watching Illya's face and listening to the conversation, Napoleon marveled at his friend's control, certain he would not have been able to cope nearly so well. As it was he was having difficulty comprehending what he was hearing — that nothing more could be done. He barely managed to bring himself out of his stupor in time to hear Lawrence's response.

"I would say no more than a few months, probably two or three," the doctor replied. "As I believe I told you at the beginning, this is a very fast-growing cancer, and it has spread quite extensively already, especially considering the massive doses of chemotherapy you've had. You can most likely expect severe lower back pain at any point now, and for that likely to become disabling relatively soon. I'll give you some pain medication now, then increase it as it becomes worse. Later, here in the hospital, we can administer even stronger doses intravenously."

"And if I choose not to return to the hospital?" Illya queried. "What of pain control then? We have previously employed in-home nurses and I would prefer to do so again. In that event would you allow intravenous pain treatment there?"

"Of course. Whatever is easiest for you." Dr. Lawrence glanced at Napoleon briefly, then back to Illya again. "I've heard that Napoleon is back in charge of Section Two full time," he noted. "Does that mean you're on your own now, or are you still with him?"

"He's still with me," Napoleon answered,

finding his voice at last. "It gives us a chance to spend more time together than we could otherwise. He's never alone when he needs supervised care, if that's what you're thinking," he added. "That was why we decided to hire a nurse, because I couldn't be there. And I don't know about Illya," he stated bluntly, "but I'd much prefer he was able to spend the rest of his days at home than in the hospital."

"Yes, that is my wish also," Illya confirmed, casting Solo a tremulous glance that let Napoleon see his tear-glazed eyes. "I do not wish to be in pain unnecessarily, though."

"You won't be," Dr. Lawrence promised. "I'll prescribe all the pain medication you need. Is there any other way I can help you?" he asked, his tone softer. "I sincerely wish I'd been able to give you better news."

"As I do," Illya replied, smiling sadly. "But no, there is nothing more. Just something for the pain, I believe will be all."

Nodding, Jeffrey Lawrence quickly wrote out the prescriptions then came around to hand them to Illya who rose to meet him, apparently eager to leave. For the first time Napoleon caught a glimpse of a wince on the handsome features at Illya's movements and wondered how much pain his friend had already endured silently. He refused to think how much worse it was likely to get as he stood up as well.

"If you need anything, even just to talk," Lawrence said, "call me. Don't hesitate. I'd like to see you again in about three weeks to see how you're doing, but when it becomes necessary I'll come to you so you won't have to make the trip in. If that's all right."

"Very good," Illya nodded. "Thank you." He glanced at the prescriptions, raising one eyebrow as he did. "Thank you for these also. I suspect they will prove most valuable. I also appreciate your candor with me. The truth means a great deal right now."

"I wish it could be better," the doctor replied, his voice filled with regret. "Good luck, Illya. Take care."

Pausing to shake the doctor's hand, Napoleon followed his friend from the office in silence, unsure what to say or how, but taking in the slump of the broad shoulders as they walked toward the hospital pharmacy. Only after he had turned in the prescription slips did Illya actually look at Napoleon, and did so with tears again filling his eyes.

Automatically Napoleon opened his arms and gathered the Russian to him in a tight embrace, uncaring for the first time if anyone saw or what might be thought.

Both unable to speak, they seemed content to simply hold one another, sharing both their grief and strength. Napoleon knew it would not be the last time for such exchanges just as it was not the first. He only prayed he would be strong enough to support both of them when Illya grew worse.

* * *

Which happened more rapidly than either of them had imagined, virtually overnight. For that week and the next Illya was able to be up walking and able to function, yet by the next week he was confined by the pain to his bed. Though Napoleon spent as much time at home as he could manage, he found himself resenting even his shortened work hours, the precious time his U.N.C.L.E. tasks took him from his friend. When they returned for Illya's three week appointment with Jeffrey Lawrence, Napoleon wasn't at all surprised when the physician took him aside for a private chat.

"He doesn't have much longer, Napoleon," Lawrence told him quietly. "I'm sorry. The cancer is spreading at an incredible rate. It's already all throughout his pelvic bone structure, and I suspect it's in the liver now as well. I wouldn't expect him to last more than another few weeks."

"I figured as much," Napoleon nodded sadly. "He isn't eating enough to keep a bird alive. I wonder if you could do me a favor, though," he requested. "Could you tell Mr. Waverly what you've told me? I want to spend whatever time Illya has left at home with him, and the old man hasn't been too agreeable to letting me take the time off."

"I'll call him as soon as you've left," the doctor promised. "I know it would mean a lot to Illya if you could be there too. Is he doing all right with the pain medication or does he need something stronger? I can order the IV medication anytime."

"He probably needs it, but I doubt if he'll take it," the senior agent smiled. "Even as sick as he is, he's stubborn as a mule. We still have round-the-clock nurses so maybe you should go ahead and order it; that way it'll be there if he changes his mind."

"Consider it done. Anything else? How are you?"

"As well as I can be knowing I'm about to lose the most important person in my life." Napoleon swallowed hard as he blinked away hot tears. "Neither of us have been able to talk about what his death means to us, but for me it's harder than hell. I just thank God you've been able to keep him from suffering as much as you have."

"Sometimes we can't do much more than that, unfortunately," Jeffrey Lawrence said grimly. "God knows I wish I could. I really hoped the chemotherapy would buy him a year or so, yet all it did was make him suffer more. Life really doesn't seem fair sometimes."

"That's an understatement," Napoleon replied fervently. He paused then and sighed. "If that's all I'd like to get back to Illya. I'm sure he's anxious to go home."

"Yes, I expect so," the doctor nodded. "By the way, I did tell him what I just told you so he knows it won't be much longer now. I thought it might help you to discuss things more openly if you were both aware."

"I think it will. Thank you." Napoleon shook the doctor's hand. "I'll be in touch."

* * *

Due to his limited mobility and the severity of pain in his back and pelvis, just getting Illya to and from the apartment was a major chore. Though Illya, with his typical Russian stubbornness, insisted on trying to use his walker from the car to elevator, Napoleon ended up carrying him instead. He had to fight back tears as he realized how effortless the task was, how little of his partner remained.

Once settled back in bed and having taken more pain medication, Illya gradually regained his breath and strength over the course of the afternoon. Though he refused more than a few bites of dinner as usual, his blue eyes seemed more alert somehow. After taking Illya's dishes back to the kitchen, Napoleon returned to the bedroom to sit at his lover's side.

"Are you feeling a little better tonight or just trying to put on a front for me?" he inquired lightly, pulling his chair close beside the bed. "You seem like you might be in a little less pain."

"Not really. The physical pain is about the same." Illya reached out for Napoleon's hand. "I'm not sure exactly what is so different tonight."

Fighting down an irrational urge to panic, Napoleon managed to smile and squeeze Illya's hand.

"Maybe you just needed some fresh air," he suggested. "Or maybe all Dr. Lawrence's tests did you some good somehow."

"Only in that they told me what I already suspected. That our time together shall not be long." Biting his lip, Illya raised his eyes. "Glad as I am to be here with you, I am sorry to make you suffer through all this with me," he murmured. "I know how difficult it must be to watch someone die. I just want you to know that being here has made it much easier for me to accept what is coming. There are no words to thank you for providing this time for me."

"For us, tovarich," Napoleon corrected. "It's important to me too. I couldn't bear the thought of having you in a hospital or a clinic somewhere. I need you here with me too."

"That is very kind of you. Thank you." Illya paused, swallowing hard. "It is hard to believe it is only a few months that I have been here with you. We have shared a great deal in that time."

"Yes, we have. And every moment of that time has been precious to me." Napoleon squeezed the his hand. "Especially that first time we made love."

"Ah yes. The start of all our magical evenings." Illya sighed then, closing his eyes. "Have you any idea how much I regret being such a disappointment to you lately?" he inquired. "To no longer fulfill your needs. I cannot even express my feelings in words."

"Oh, I think I know," the senior agent smiled. "Although you're being foolish again. All that matters to me is to have you here with me; the rest was just an added treat. I only wish there was some way I could still give you that pleasure somehow."

"Yes, I have wished that also. Unfortunately the drugs have taken care of that. Not to mention that any such movements would be excruciating now."

"In spite of what you've been saying, it's been pretty bad for you, hasn't it, tovarich?" Solo guessed softly. "The pain, I mean. Even with the medication, you've had some pretty rough times."

"Some, I suppose. Not many." But Illya's eyes were averted as he spoke. "Dr. Lawrence told me he was going to order the IV medication for me next week as a precaution, however. That, I think, may be very good." He winced then as he ever so slightly moved his hips.

"Napoleon, I — it is unfair of me to ask this of you, but could you lie with me for a bit tonight?"

Illya asked hesitantly. "It has been so very long since we were able to be close with one another, and I seem to need you here with me tonight. Would that be too much to ask?"

"Illya, nothing is too much for you, ever." Napoleon got up and moved the chair away from the bed. "Anything you want, all you ever have to do is tell me and it's yours. I just hope the movement won't hurt you too much."

"If it does it will be worth it."

Napoleon frowned, puzzled by the sudden importance to the Russian, but proceeded to carefully climb onto the bed. He bit his lip at the sound of Illya's stifled gasp when the bed moved beneath him, then settled himself as quickly as he could close to Illya's side. He felt perspiration dampen Illya's pajamas just from the exertion of turning onto his side. Illya snuggled as close to Napoleon as was physically possible, then released a prolonged, shaky sigh.

"This is the way I have always hoped it could happen," he murmured, his voice strangely soft. "To be at home, with loved ones — to be with you. Most people fear death, but they shouldn't. Not when it can come so peacefully. Personally, I shall not miss the pain at all."

"Well, I can't blame you for feeling that way," Napoleon admitted, "but you don't have to sound like it's so imminent. Dr. Lawrence said you still have —"

"A few more weeks. I know. He told me that also. I — tonight I suspect he is wrong." Illya's arms tightened around Napoleon. "That is why I asked you to lie here with me. So I would not be alone."

Though everything in his being told Napoleon to pull back from Illya, to look into his face and dispute what he was saying, to run and call for help, the agent found himself unable to move. Instead he tightened his arms around the frail body he too instinctively knew he was about to lose. He made no attempt to stop the tears that welled up in his eyes and began silently falling, dampening Illya's hair.

"I love you, Illyusha," he whispered. "More than anything. I've never been able to find the right words to say that, or a way to show you, but you're like a part of myself. I don't — I know it's selfish, but I don't want to lose you. Not even now."

"You shall never lose me, Napasha," Illya replied, his voice fainter. "I shall always be here. All you ever need do is look into your heart.

Remember the times of our special love-making and all our other good times. I shall always be there in your memories also. Just as you shall remain with me until we can be together once more." Illya caught his breath, his fingers momentarily tightening on Napoleon's back. "Forgive me, my love, but suddenly I am very tired," he murmured. "I must rest. Will you stay with me? Please?"

I'm not going anywhere, Illyusha," Napoleon promised, drawing his head back just enough to kiss the cool forehead as he stroked the soft blond hair. "You go ahead and sleep."

* * *



It was several hours later when Napoleon at last forced himself to leave his partner, leaving the bedroom to place the call to Jeffrey Lawrence he had so hoped to postpone. He was grateful for the fact that Illya had slipped away in his sleep, apparently relatively free of the pain that so long had plagued him, his body simply shutting down. Napoleon knew he would never forget sharing those moments, however, glad he had been able to fulfill his partner's last wish.

Automatically rising when Napoleon entered the living room, the night duty nurse didn't even have to ask what had happened, one look at Napoleon's tear-stained face telling all. Instead she picked up the telephone and quietly dialed, sparing Solo that final, grievous task.

* * *

Though it had spanned only 36 years, Illya's life had been a full one, Napoleon realized, watching the last mourners leave the grave site after the final service there. Full and exciting and happy — and to its final moments, filled with Napoleon's love. There was nothing more he could have given the Russian, Napoleon realized, knowing that through their love, they had shared it all. Despite all their troubled times and pain, Illya's last days had been filled with loving too.

He laid the red rosebud he held on top of Illya's casket, then rested his hand there for a long, silent time. At last he turned and left his partner for the last time, blinking back the tears from his eyes — he felt Illya's spirit tell him that he would be waiting until Napoleon could join him once more.

 The End 

✧ Engagement ✧

by
Trinity Pawling

Avon stalked into the crew lounge. Vila, Dayna, and Soolin gave him startled, nervous stares. There was no reason for them to worry. Yes, they had defied him, but there was only one person he blamed for it.

"Where's Tarrant?" he asked, in a voice as smooth as two-decade old whiskey.

The three exchanged heavy glances. Finally, Dayna spoke, "In his room, I think. Avon—"

Avon spun on his heel, heading for Tarrant's quarters. Behind him, he heard Soolin say, "I'm surprised Avon and Tarrant haven't killed each other yet."

"It's hardly that bad," Dayna protested. "It was difficult at first, but eventually they came to an agreement."

"They had to," Vila chipped in. "They had to call a truce for survival's sake."

Soolin was unconvinced. "It never works—two Alpha males in such close quarters."

A very good point, Avon conceded, as their voices faded behind him. So close, they'd come so close. If Tarrant hadn't destroyed Muller's android out of his foolish fear, Avon would have had the weapon he needed to destroy the Federation—to make the galaxy safe for himself and for all his crew. *Damn him!* Avon thought, trembling with rage. Well, this particular part of the galaxy was about to become a lot less safe for Del Tarrant.

The door wasn't locked; Avon barreled through it. Tarrant was lying on his bed. He gave Avon a brief, unreadable look, then shut his eyes.

"Don't you ever do anything like that again, Tarrant."

The pilot seemed to hear the danger in that warning, for he sat up on the edge of bed, watching Avon warily. "And who's going to stop me? You?"

"I mean it, Tarrant. I won't have you undermining my leadership that way. I am charge of this crew."

"Perhaps it's time to change that."

"I suppose you think you could fill the post."

"I suppose I do."

"You'd get them all killed in a week."

"Maybe. But that's preferable to killing the entire human race." The blue eyes radiated challenge and insolence. Looking at Tarrant's face, so young and handsome and smug, Avon felt himself losing control.

Leaping forward, he grabbed Tarrant by the shoulders and pushed him back on the bed. He forced his mouth violently down on the pilot's. It was a kiss meant to subjugate.

Tarrant gasped when he was released. He wiped his mouth slowly, eyes darkening with some unfathomable emotion. "So that's how you want to play it," he said. He hooked a long leg around Avon's knee, jerking him off balance. Avon crashed to the floor with a curse. Tarrant followed up his advantage, throwing himself over Avon. Avon slid free before he could be pinned, kicking the younger man solidly as he passed. On his feet again, Avon paused, watching Tarrant cautiously.

They circled and feinted a few times, then Tarrant, true to his nature, grew impatient. He threw himself bodily at Avon, forcing him back with brute force.

After a brief tussle, Avon fell hard. Tarrant's weight came down on him, pinning him face-down with his upper body on the bed and his knees resting on the floor. "Still think you're in charge of this crew?" Tarrant asked mockingly, not even out of breath.

"More than you'll ever be," Avon spat.

In response, his arm was twisted painfully

behind him. Avon felt a tingle of apprehension, wondering if it had been wise to so antagonize Tarrant. Ordinarily, he did not view Tarrant as any sort of a threat, but the young man did have a temper....

Then Avon felt a hand snake around his waist to fumble at his belt. He began cursing and struggling, to no avail. The belt, then the pants, were unfastened, then yanked down with a sharp, rough jerk. Avon felt cold air caress his bare buttocks and thighs, shortly followed by Tarrant's free hand.

"You wouldn't dare, Tarrant," Avon threatened, trying desperately to bluff his way out of this.

"Wouldn't I?" Tarrant replied, his voice rich with amusement—and arousal. His long, slender fingers tickled the tender inside of Avon's thigh, then the even more tender crevice between Avon's cheeks. Avon twisted, trying to kick Tarrant in a fierce lunge. But the clothing tangled about his legs hampered him, and Tarrant was, as he had always claimed, younger and faster. Tarrant merely increased the pressure on Avon's captive arm, until it seemed about to break, and threw his weight heavily against Avon. Avon shuddered as he felt Tarrant's hardness against his bare buttocks. Suddenly a shiny object appeared before Avon's gaze. It was a clipgun.

"See this, Avon?" Tarrant asked, breathless, and probably not from exertion. "We can do this the easy way or not—but we are going to do it."

"Are you going to kill me then?" Avon asked, suddenly still. "Because that's the only way—" He broke off. The cold muzzle of the gun was trailing down his neck, his back, down, down.... "No, Tarrant," he whispered hoarsely, shivering.

The hard, cold gun reached his crack, pushed its way in, probed bluntly at his anus. "It's not an uncommon way to die," Tarrant said conversationally. "You'd be surprised, the number of people who entertain themselves with weapons without first taking proper precautions."

"All right, Tarrant," Avon said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I yield."

"What was that? I didn't hear you." The gun pushed harder at Avon.

"I yield," Avon said, his voice loud and harsh. The gun vanished. There was the sound of clothing being undone, then Tarrant's hard, thick length jammed brutally into Avon. Avon gritted his teeth, listening to Tarrant's deep sigh of pleasure.

But Avon's word was always good; he merely buried his face in his arms, staring at the rumpled surface of the bed only centimeters from his eyes. Let Tarrant do what he wanted; it would soon be over, and then the arrant bastard better watch his back.

But Tarrant was in no hurry. His thrusts were long and slow, leisurely even. The pain of the initial entry had faded, and Avon found himself beginning to be aroused. He tried to think of other things, of items they needed to pick up on their next supply run, of how angry he was with Tarrant, but it was no use. He was getting hard. Maybe Tarrant was so involved in his own pleasure he wouldn't notice Avon's condition... but no, before long Tarrant reached around, groping for Avon's penis and finding it. The younger man murmured appreciatively as he fingered the hard length, making Avon shudder. Tarrant's hand wrapped around Avon's manhood, gripping firmly, stroking deliciously, faster and faster. Avon tried to resist the pleasure, but before long he was moving to Tarrant's rhythm, hips bucking, pushing back onto Tarrant's deep penetration, forward into the briskly stroking hand. He clenched his fists on the bed, almost ripping the sheets and not noticing. The exquisite pressure built and built, until finally Avon's body couldn't take any more. He climaxed violently, muffling a scream into the bed, every muscle in his body quivering and shaking.

But Tarrant did not climax. He continued his long, slow thrusts. His hands were now around Avon's chest, opening the leather vest and shirt, snaking in to stroke the soft fur and rub at small, hard nipples.

"Get it over with, Tarrant," Avon said once he trusted himself to speak.

Tarrant laughed. "You know you love this."

Avon made a sound of derision. "Don't read too much into it. It's been a long time. My body reflexively responded, that's all."

"No," Tarrant replied, his breath whispering against Avon's back as he kissed it. "You're mine. I own you, body and soul, and you'll admit it before we're through."

Avon didn't deign to reply. Tarrant would get tired of this eventually, finish up, and leave Avon alone....

But he didn't. Instead, he continued his slow steady rhythm, his hands wandering over Avon's chest and belly, then lower. Impossibly, Avon grew hard again. Tarrant straightened, drawing Avon with

him. The new angle increased the stimulation, and Avon found himself panting. A long-fingered hand explored his navel, then spread flat against his lower belly, pressing him back against Tarrant. Tarrant kissed the side of Avon's neck. "You're so beautiful when you're helpless, Avon," he whispered, his tongue teasing at the whorls of Avon's ear.

Helpless! He hadn't been helpless since—since—Avon lost his train of thought as Tarrant's palms slid down, stroking hips and thighs. Fingers trailed over the insides of Avon's legs, then settled in the intimate hollows where thighs met torso, making him tremble. He looked down at himself, his disarrayed clothing revealing the curling hair of his chest in stark contrast to his paleness, the flushed red of his penis vivid against his white thighs. Mesmerized, he watched as Tarrant's hands moved toward his balls, cradling them, gently squeezing and rolling them. For an eternity Tarrant delicately played with Avon's testicles, then one hand turned at last to Avon's penis. Avon groaned as he felt the skillful touch slide up his manhood. The warm hand grasped him firmly, the thumb swirled around the slick, smooth glans, and Avon threw his head back. The hand began stroking, and Avon thrust into it gratefully. He was so aroused it was nearly painful. He felt the deep tingling at the base of his testicles that signaled incipient orgasm, when suddenly the stimulation stopped. Furious, Avon reached to bring himself to climax—only to be stopped by Tarrant. The younger man held Avon's wrists firmly, in his hands. Avon struggled frenetically for a moment, then stilled, gasping with frustrated arousal. "Arrogant, misbegotten bastard," he spat.

"And those are my better qualities," Tarrant agreed cheerfully. He was still deep inside Avon, but his movements were slow and slight, enough to keep Avon aroused but not enough to bring him relief.

"Damn you, Tarrant!"

"You know what I want to hear." His teeth nipped at Avon's earlobe, then a hot, wet tongue probed into the sensitive auditory channel.

Avon squirmed in delicious torment. "All right, you win." Hopefully that would be enough; Tarrant didn't seem the type to demand too much groveling.

Apparently, it sufficed. Tarrant chuckled triumphantly, then began thrusting deep and strong, his hand once again stroking Avon's organ. Avon

was filled with relief as the stimulation resumed. The relief soon became ever more intense urgency, and he moaned helplessly as he was carried higher and higher on the strength and skill of Tarrant's lithe, young body. He was trembling on the edge, close, so close, but again the climax was denied him. "Tarrant!" Avon cried, a raw scream of torment. He fought futilely against Tarrant's hold, then fell back, quivering. "Please, Tarrant."

Tarrant was none too steady himself, but his reply was insolent as ever. "I don't know, Avon. You're so lovely when you're at my mercy." His mouth caressed Avon's damp hair. "So beautifully powerless and desperate."

"Tarrant, I admit it. You own me, body and soul. Now please, please!"

Tarrant released Avon's wrists and hugged him, kissing his temple. "Very well, since you beg so prettily...."

Again Avon felt the deep thrusts, the caressing hands. The tension coiled in his loins grew and grew, until he was shaking with it. He hovered on the edge for what seemed an eternity, half afraid that Tarrant would deny him again. But all Tarrant did was gasp, "I love you, Avon." Avon shuddered and came, and it was like no climax he had ever experienced before. It started at his toes and rose through his whole being, a numbing, overwhelming wave of pleasure. As his chest was spattered with his own hot ejaculate, he heard Tarrant cry out and felt the jetting warmth of his partner's climax.

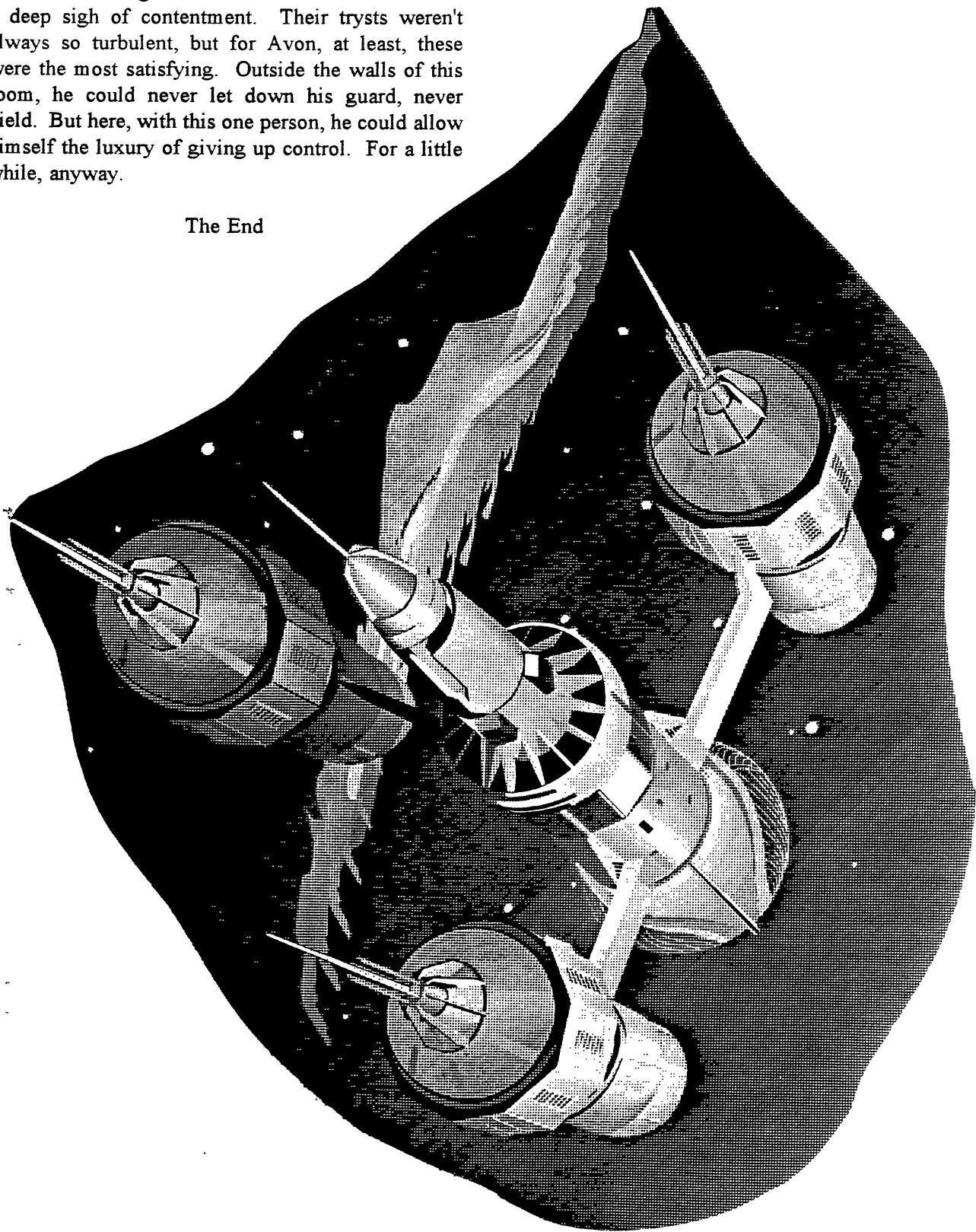
Avon supported himself on the bed again, Tarrant a panting, heavy weight against his back. Eventually, Tarrant withdrew, standing up and pulling Avon with him. They collapsed on the bed, lying curled together in the breathless, trembling aftermath. Avon kissed the damp curls plastered to Tarrant's forehead. Tarrant was silent for a long time—unusual for him. Finally he said, "I know we made a deal, Avon. You're in charge on the flight deck, I'm in charge in the bedroom. But I'm not going to apologize for destroying that android. It was too dangerous. Our agreement doesn't mean that I'll go along with anything so blatantly suicidal."

Avon shrugged. "Perhaps you were right," he said. "It was Orac's idea, after all." He found that his anger over the incident had evaporated and wasn't surprised. That was a common aftereffect of one of his and Tarrant's more violent sex sessions. He rolled over, pinning Tarrant beneath him. "Does

that mean I get to be on top sometimes?"

Tarrant grinned in delight at being forgiven and curled a long arm around Avon. Avon heaved a deep sigh of contentment. Their trysts weren't always so turbulent, but for Avon, at least, these were the most satisfying. Outside the walls of this room, he could never let down his guard, never yield. But here, with this one person, he could allow himself the luxury of giving up control. For a little while, anyway.

The End



Orbital Aberration

By
Irish

The door to Avon's room opened and Vila appeared. Unsurprised, Avon kept working at his terminal until Vila leaned over him and switched it off. With difficulty, the tech refrained from making any comment. He simply sat and waited, not looking at Vila. His heart started thundering in his ears when the thief moved past him and activated the panel which slid back to reveal Dorian's playroom. It was, Avon supposed, his now, since it was connected to his sleeping quarters. Or more correctly, perhaps, he should think of it as Vila's playroom, for it was Vila who had initiated the "play." He did not think of it as recreation, himself. To him it was as necessary as breathing and as shameful as—but he could think of nothing as shameful.

Avon waited, knowing Vila would tell him to come in when he wanted him. He considered getting undressed, but the last time he'd done that without being told, Vila had used a cane on him that cut his skin with every stroke. Vila left him sitting there for some time, knowing that even as Avon's resentment grew, so would the tech's excitement. This post-Malodaar Vila Restal was as refined in his torments as he was crude in his speech.

"Get in here, Kerr," he ordered, his voice revealing that state of excitement that meant he'd thought of something really nasty this time. Automatically, Avon obeyed, already short of breath. Vila was waiting just inside the doorway and grabbed Avon's hair as he entered, pushing downward to force him to his knees. Avon kept his eyes down, having already learned the hard way what would happen if he didn't. Vila was worse about that than Blake had ever been. Nimble fingers

moved to cup the back of his head. Vila's other hand came around and placed something just at the base of Avon's skull. For a moment he thought he was having a stroke. He felt an actual heat inside his brain, as if some warm liquid had been pumped inside the skull, and then the heat descended to his lower body, which had already been in the state of excitement even the prospect of one of these sessions brought on. He bit his lips to keep from crying out, and heard Vila laugh. "This is a little something I found when you sent me out with Tarrant. I was assured it has no deleterious or permanent side effects, but while it is in place it's better than a cockring for keeping you right on the ragged edge. Direct neural stimulation, I'm told. What do you think?"

Horried, Avon realized he was helplessly pumping his hips. Not even Blake had reduced him to this. It was all he could do not to beg Vila to fuck him. The thief laughed again, then took enough pity on him to open the baggy trousers, revealing Vila's large, rosy cock. "Do you want it, Kerr?" he asked.

Avon nodded, struggling not to move, feeling as if he were on the verge of bursting into tears. He had not wept even when Vila had used the leather whip that first time and beat him into unconsciousness. Pleasure was a more treacherous enemy than pain.

"Say it, Kerr. Tell me what you want."

Avon was going to weep, goddamn Vila to hell! His voice came out even more harshly than Vila's: "Fuck my face, Restal."

Grabbing Avon's hair, Vila lifted his cock and balls, the hard bolt of him already leaking precum, and Avon opened his mouth to take it in to the root. He had learned long ago, during a time he did not remember, how to do this to give the master the most pleasure. He received nearly as much erotic stimulation from sucking a man's cock as he did from being fucked. He soon found himself moaning around the stifling bulk that filled his throat, swallowing frantically in an attempt to make him come, to give the master pleasure—that was the purpose of his entire existence in those moments. Whatever this neural stimulator was, however, it would not let him come, even when he resorted to humping Vila's leg—something he'd probably be punished for later, and he was nearly insane with a need for release that kept growing until he thought his cock would burst. And somehow, because of his conditioning, even that fact was thrilling. It seemed

right that he should suffer while Vila roared his conquest over him and shot down his throat a seemingly endless load of cum. Avon continued to swallow until Vila yanked his head away from his no doubt too-sensitive penis and shoved him hard.

The tech landed on his back and stayed there, sobbing for breath, for relief, but unable to reach for his own suffering member without permission. Still trapped inside his clothing, Avon's cock was beginning to be far too painful, and he did roll to his side, trying to keep the tender tissue from being further compressed by his pants.

Next would come the beating, he knew. His cock twitched even at the thought. Vila would choose one of the instruments racked on the dark wall of the black room and beat him with it until he exhausted himself or Avon passed out, or both. All the while, Vila would talk. He would require answers to questions. It was terrifying. Avon could hardly wait.

"Get your clothes off, Kerr." He loved using Avon's given name and not just because it triggered the conditioning. He liked it because he was a Delta calling an Alpha by his first name, something that could have gotten him kicked to death in an Alpha district on Earth, and under circumstances that would surely have resulted in the death penalty except under certain very special conditions.

Avon's fingers were shaking so hard it was difficult to disrobe. As was customary, he neatly folded each item as he removed it and placed his clothing in the drawer provided on the wall below the whips. Keeping his eyes down now meant that he was watching his poor penis drool strings of precum, the muscles of his belly twitching and rolling as he fought for control that simply wasn't possible; wouldn't be allowed. When Vila came up behind him, he could feel the man's penis already hardening again. Avon sometimes wondered whether Vila took drugs. Surely he didn't walk around like that all the time. Vila's hands came around to stimulate Avon's nipples, and he nearly fell. The thief chuckled in his ear, then teased the lobe with his tongue. "Takes the starch out of your knees, don't it boy?"

"Yes, Sir," Avon admitted, though it came out rather more like a plea than an answer.

"Which whip shall I use this time?"

The tech's eyes toured the collection of canes, whips, switches, ropes and chains, then resumed their proper placement. "Whichever pleases you most,

Sir."

Pushing him aside, Vila walked along the row while he waited, feeling a sweat of dread break out under his arms and along his back. "You know," Vila remarked, "Blake had one rather like this, didn't he?"

The question required Avon to look up. Vila had a short-handled whip with several flat leather thongs that looked far too familiar. Avon focused on the floor again and whispered, "Yes, sir, he did." He vividly remembered Blake using that whip handle to fuck him for hours.

"Yes, he did. I remember it, actually, you see. Don't just stand there, climb on the rack, you slut." Avon moved obediently to stand beside the contraption which occupied the center of the black room. It was composed largely of wide leather bands and wooden frame and left whichever side was down almost as exposed as the side that was up.

Avon hesitated. "Which way, sir?"

"Face down, I think. Yes, I do remember a whip just like this one. I had one of the most enjoyable evenings of my life watching him warm your pretty arse with that thing and then fuck you with it till you begged him to stop. Would it have been more exciting for you if you'd known I was watching?"

Avon groaned, and Vila laughed. He knew perfectly well that one of the most erotic triggers for a submissive was being watched. Avon felt the restraints close about him and sank another level into a sort of daze. It was a feeling rather like a lift going gently down, while he moved further and further away from the man he was outside this room and closer and closer to the trained and conditioned pleasure slave he was inside it. At that moment, he loved Restal totally.

The whip came down hard, and Avon hissed. "Go on," Vila urged him. "Yell your lungs out. There's no one on the base but us right now, Kerr, and no one but me will hear you."

Between the neural stimulator and the conditioned response to the pain of the whipping, Avon was soon sobbing as nicely as Vila could have wished.

Perhaps for that reason, Vila flung the whip away much sooner than usual and mounted his prisoner, leaning forward to release enough of the restraints to allow Avon to push backward against his vigorous thrusts. Near his ear, Avon heard through the haze of pain and pleasure, "They

conditioned you deliberately, didn't they, Avon? So they could control you. And Blake guessed it right away, didn't he?"

"Yes," Avon gasped, literally weeping—something else he'd never done for Blake.

"You should have come to me," Vila rasped. "I loved you. Before Malodaar, I loved you. I would have played the little game with you and left you your self-respect. But now...now it's too late. Now I'll just use you, Avon, the way you use all of us. And you'll just have to take it, won't you?"

"Yes, sir. Please, sir."

"Please? Please what?"

"Let me come."

"Soon. First I want to hear you say it."

"Sir?"

"You know what I mean, whore. Say it!" Vila punctuated the demand by reaching down and pulling hard on Avon's balls.

"Forgive me, Restal. I beg you, forgive me!"

Hearing the cry, Vila came massively, digging his fingers into Avon's sides so hard the tech knew there would be bruises later on top of the stripes left by the whip. While his body still spasmed atop his prisoner's, Vila removed the neural stimulator, and with a scream that hurt his throat, Avon finally reached completion, his tormented cock shooting streams across the black floor that Vila would later make him clean up—with his mouth.

Gasping for breath, lying full length on Avon's burning back, still enclosed in the heat of his shuddering body, Vila growled, "Never. I will never forgive you, you bastard. I hate you with every fibre of my soul."

Ah, there it was. That place in his head where everything stopped and he was at peace with himself. When Vila released him from the rack, Avon fell to his knees and promptly kissed the thief's feet. "Thank you, sir, thank you."

Vila backhanded him, and Avon was dismayed to hear a hint of tears in the thief's voice. "Damn you, Avon!"

The tech froze in place, tears still welling in his own eyes. "Sir?"

The thief was weeping. "You never cried before. I should kill you."

Confused, not only because Vila was now addressing him by his proper name, Avon fought the fog in his head and dared a direct look at Vila's face. Whatever his Federation conditioning had made of his reaction to his own distress, other people's pain

cut Avon like shards of glass. Avon wiped blood from his lip and moved to sit beside the miserable Vila, who was hunched in on himself. Tentatively, the tech said, "Please don't, Vila. I won't ever cry again, if you don't wish it. I promise." Vila only wrapped his arms around himself tighter and rocked like an abandoned child.

Carefully, Avon moved nearer, tried to see Vila's face, and failed. "Tell me what you want, please. I can't help if I don't know what you need."

The thief's voice was muffled: "I want to go back before Malodaar. I loved you for so long...and then I loved hurting you. It seemed like the perfect revenge, humiliating and abusing you like that. But—you never cried before. I'm not...like this. I detest people who hurt people." The sad little voice wavered then went on. "I need somebody to love me, Avon, ain't it pathetic? I need somebody who cares whether I live or die."

"Will you look at me, please?"

Vila shook his head. Avon reached over and put both his arms around the smaller man. He leaned his aching head against Vila and said softly, "You don't have to hurt me anymore, you know. I give you my word, I will be very careful not to get in a situation like Malodaar again."

Stiff in his arms, Vila still would not look at him. "It's no good, Avon. You can't promise that. Not the way we live. Anyway, that's not the point. I'm just bloody tired of being so fucking lonely all the time!" Vila sobbed as if his heart were breaking.

At something of a loss, Avon finally rose, picked the thief up and returned to the bedroom, where he sat on the bed, Vila in his arms. He held on tight and let Vila cry, stroking his hair, an odd tune running through his mind. Was it something his grandmother had crooned to him when he was an infant? "I care, Vila. I may be mad, and perhaps you can never trust me again, but I do care." He was still holding Vila when he fell asleep.

Vila came gasping up from the nightmare, and the sight of Avon's dark, confused eyes made it worse. He struck out at the already bruised mouth, then realized where he was and what had happened. He waited for Avon's scathing contempt, the vitriol, since Vila had revealed his innermost feelings as if to someone who actually gave a damn. But Avon only regarded him calmly, not blank and uncaring, but...what? Openly?

"Avon, I can't do that anymore."

"I understand."

"I'm still furious about Malodaar."
"I know. I can't blame you for that."
"But...I don't want to give you up."
"Then don't."
"Huh?"

Avon smiled suddenly and the intensity of his gaze made the hair stand up on Vila's neck. He leaned forward and murmured in Vila's ear, "Next time, don't use the whip or the stimulator. Just tell me what you want, Vila. That's all I need to know."

Stunned, the thief blinked a few times, unconsciously licked his lips, then shivered when Avon did the same. "Um, Avon."

"Hm?"

"Is it hot in here?"

"No."

"Avon, I'd like...that is...have you ever wanted to...uh..."

"Just say it, Vila. I have to know what you want."

He ducked his head, feeling his face heat. "I've always wanted you to...fuck me." He felt Avon go very still. Quickly, he said, "I wouldn't want you to hurt me, mind, but I've always wanted to, you know." When the tech neither moved nor spoke, Vila sighed. "Never mind. I know that's not your...." After that he couldn't speak for a while, because Avon had pushed him down in the bed and was kissing him. Vila didn't think he'd ever been kissed like that before...the tender insistence of it was breathtaking.

When Avon raised his head and Vila could take stock of the situation again, he realized he was about to have his heart's desire. There was no mistaking the purpose of the ointment Avon had produced from the bedside table or the fire in his eyes.

Carefully, Avon arranged Vila so that his hips were resting on Avon's folded legs, his lower limbs spread wide. Watching Vila's face, the pale, dark-eyed man took a handful of the ointment and spread it on his already rising penis.

Vila watched the cockstand grow, dark blue veins showing against rosy white flesh, and felt his arse twitch and his heart rate increase. It had really been a long time, and Vila had never asked anyone to do this to him before. Always before, it had been at someone else's will, not his own. So he was a little apprehensive, but by the time Avon had introduced a second finger into his back passage, Vila was groaning aloud and pumping his hips. "Now, Avon, please. Please!"

Slowly, Avon entered his shaking body, hissing at the sensation as the tight cavern gripped his cock, then groaning as Vila deliberately relaxed to let him in further. Vila watched Avon's face while he could still see and marveled at the way bliss transformed the man into something resembling an angel. Soon though, Avon had found the perfect rhythm, the perfect angle, and Vila was lost. Crying out with each thrust, he urged Avon deeper and deeper still, praying that it would never stop, ever, or that he might die like this, full of pleasure and striving for more. Then Avon took Vila's penis in hand and forced him over the edge into heaven.

Afterwards, Vila seemed to be everywhere, running to get a wet cloth to wash them off, changing the bedsheets, then draping that fine-boned, lean frame across Avon's body and pulling the duvet up over both of them. Trailing kisses all along Avon's neck, up over his face and back down again, Vila stopped at his ear and whispered, "Not only are you the best cocksucker in the sector, you can really fuck!"

Avon chuckled, then laughed, then roared. When Vila took fright at his mirth, he deliberately controlled it. "Thank you, Vila. Just don't let the word get around, will you?"

Grinning, Vila plopped down in the crook of Avon's arm. "Are you kidding? I'm keeping you all to myself!"

"Yes, sir," Avon teased.

Vila sobered. "I meant it, Avon. I won't hurt you anymore."

"The question, Vila, is whether you will forgive me for hurting you?"

After a frozen moment, Vila relaxed again. "Oh, I expect so. So long as you keep fucking me regular-like."

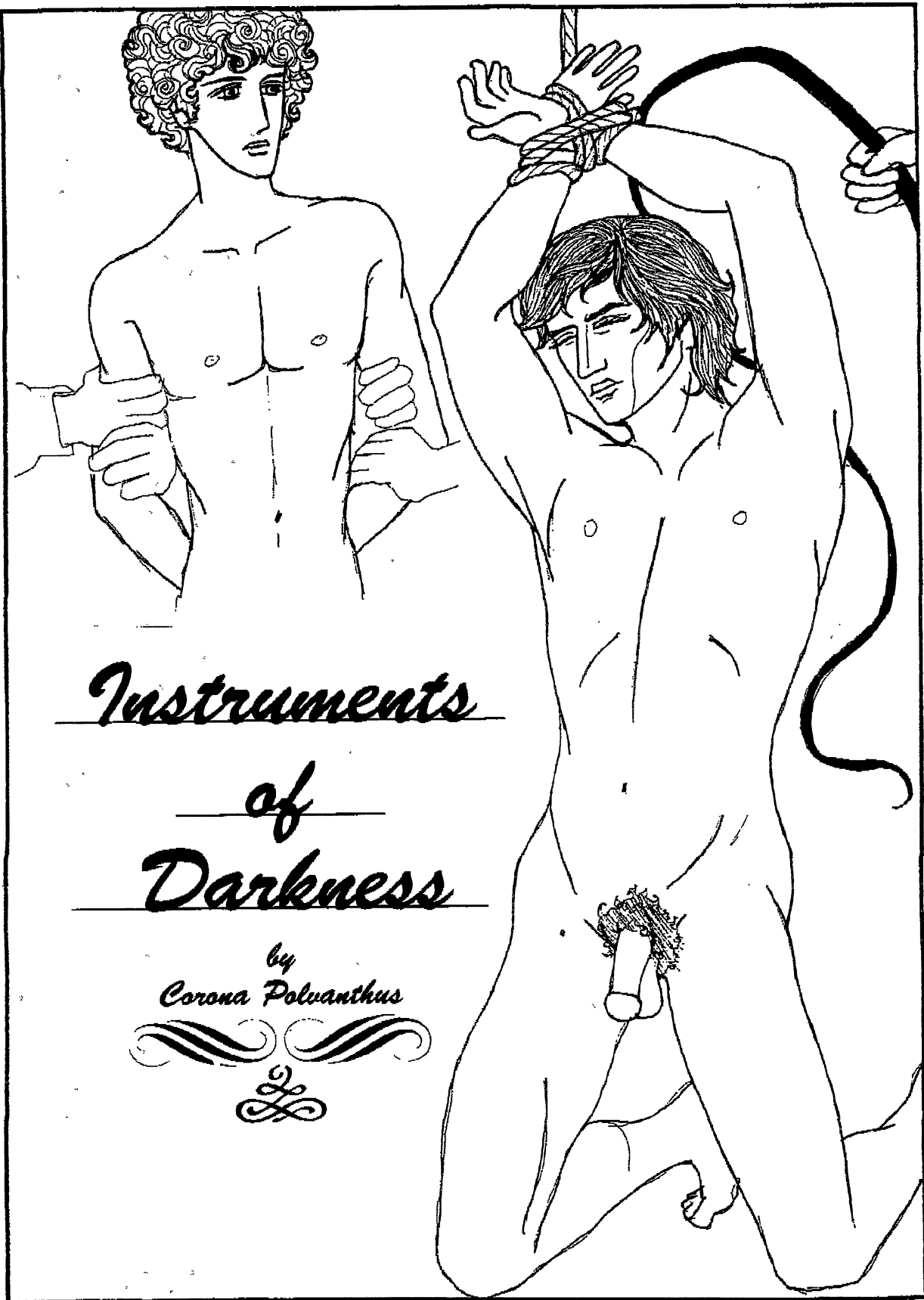
Avon suddenly moved to face Vila directly, his eyes serious and somehow vulnerable. "I am sorry, you know. If there were any way I could go back...."

Vila reached up and stopped those lips he so loved. "Shut up, Kerr. Shut the hell up and suck my cock."

Avon grinned, kissed the fingers that covered his lips and gave a mocking half-bow. "By your command, Restal."

Vila was very glad the children were going to be gone for a whole week. It would take that long to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

The End



Instruments
of
Darkness

by
Corona Polvanthus
L

Instruments

of

Darkness

by
Corona Polvanthus

Brutal hands yanked Tarrant to his feet. Heavy chains were fastened to his wrists and ankles and connected to similar chains binding Avon. Then the two of them were shoved out the open door. It was the first time they had been allowed out of their cell since the interrogations had ended.

They were led through a maze of corridors, to emerge in a small courtyard. There were people at either end of it, facing each other. Tarrant recognized the formation instantly, with a heady mixture of terror and relief. It was a firing squad. They were to be executed.

He looked toward Avon, and found him staring at a figure across the courtyard. Servalan, of course. She posed arrogantly in the far doorway, her jeweled gown of sable and sequins jarringly out of place in the dingy surroundings. She smiled as Tarrant looked at her, and gestured to the guards.

Tarrant expected that he and Avon would join the three prisoners huddled against the other wall; instead, they were taken toward Servalan. "Avon, Tarrant," she greeted them, her voice lovely and heartless as always. "How nice you could come."

"We didn't have a choice," Avon pointed out.

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "This is a special occasion—a celebration. It wouldn't have been the same without you."

Warily, Tarrant asked, "What are we celebrating?"

"Why, my victory, of course." With a dramatic sweep of her arm, she indicated the line of

prisoners. "My glorious success in ridding the galaxy of its most notorious terrorists."

Tarrant jerked around to stare at the prisoners. He knew them, despite the filth and bruises disguising their faces. Soolin, Dayna, Vila. "No!" he choked.

Smug and triumphant, Servalan said, "I knew you would want to be here for the execution."

Tarrant's first panicked impulse was to plead for his friends' lives, but Avon's dark eyes caught his, restraining him. He understood the message in those unfathomable eyes easily enough. Servalan was hoping that they would grovel and beg, hoping to see them break. Other than refuse to accommodate her, there was nothing they could do. Swallowing hard, Tarrant turned his gaze back to the prisoners.

Servalan seemed disappointed in their muted reaction. Her luscious mouth tightened for a moment, then she smiled again. "I know how much they mean to you. Perhaps it will be some consolation to you that they will not die as common criminals. I've given orders that they be granted officers' executions."

Tarrant shut his eyes. Officer's executions. That meant they would die one by one, rather than all at once. That made it worse all around—and Servalan knew it.

Vila and Dayna were herded to one side, leaving Soolin all alone against the far wall. Orders were shouted out, and the line of soldiers snapped their guns into firing position. Tarrant didn't want to look, but couldn't *not* look, either. Soolin was calm and seemingly unafraid. Her gaze met Tarrant's for a moment, and she gave him a fleeting smile. Then her chin lifted disdainfully, and she faced her executioners. A volley of shots rang out, and she was flung against the wall. Tarrant's eyes filled with tears as she crumpled to the ground, her bright blood mixing into the mud.

Dayna was brought out next. She was unable to emulate Soolin's equanimity. Her dark eyes locked onto Avon and Tarrant, wide and imploring. Tarrant's control failed him, and he made a move toward her, only to be immediately thwarted. When the order to fire was given, she was not as lucky as Soolin. She didn't die immediately; thrown back against the wall, she remained upright for several long seconds—so long that a second volley of shots was fired. As she fell beside Soolin, Tarrant

knew he would never forget her expression of pain and shock.

Vila had to be dragged out forcibly, pleading with his guards every step of the way. They stood him against the wall, and he turned his appeals to Tarrant. "Tarrant, please," he cried. "Help me! Please!"

Tarrant looked desperately toward Avon, searching for some sign that this was all a dream...a joke...a hallucination. There was only time for Avon's blank visage to register before rough hands grabbed his jaw and forced him to face forward again.

Vila's courage broke then. He began sprinting, running toward the doorway. A barrage of shots caught him before he got five meters. His body jerked, and he collapsed. Tarrant could see his face clearly; the unseeing brown eyes seemed accusing. He heard a harsh sob, and realized it was his own.

The restraining hands released him. Everything was quiet now. Three bodies were tumbled on the floor, limp in death. Splatters decorated their clothing like red fallen stars.

"Return them to their cells," Servalan said.

"Wait." Tarrant surged forward. He almost reached the sight of carnage when the chain attaching him to Avon pulled him up short.

A guard was leading an unresisting Avon toward the door.

Tarrant grabbed a handful of chain and tugged. "They might still be alive," he said, begging Avon to stop. "We need to check."

"Do we," said Avon bitterly. But he stopped in his tracks and let Tarrant pull him back toward the bodies. The guard moved as if to prevent them, but Servalan gestured him away. She was smirking with satisfaction at having finally elicited a reaction. Tarrant was conscious of her eyes on him as he approached the bloodstained forms on the ground.

Vila. Soolin. Dayna. Oh, Dayna. So many possibilities cut off forever. Tarrant tried hard to maintain an expressionless facade, to frustrate Servalan's obscene pleasure in his misery. As he gazed at the bodies of his comrades, a gulping sob escaped him. He wanted nothing more than to throw himself to the ground beside them and scream out his grief and sorrow. But he refused to provide such high amusement for the likes of Servalan. He forced himself to turn away, walking toward the door of his

own accord. Avon followed in silence. His expression had not changed.

They were led back to their cell. They were left shackled at the wrists, but the ankle chains and the links connecting them were removed. Tarrant settled on the floor with his back against one wall, his body shaking with grief and rage that he couldn't completely contain. On the opposite side of the cell Avon was composed and silent. There wasn't so much as a blink of an eyelash to commemorate the deaths of their comrades.

"You cold-hearted bastard." The words burst from Tarrant's lips before he realized he was going to say them. "Don't you give a damn about anything...anyone?" Tarrant was on his feet, charging across the cell, halting just short of his one remaining shipmate. "Dayna...Soolin...Vila.... They're dead."

"And ranting and raving will not bring them back."

"I know...." Tarrant choked on the words and watched Avon blur through the sea of tears that suddenly flooded his eyes. "But they deserve... something... an acknowledgement that they existed, that someone will mourn them."

Avon slowly pushed to his feet, standing only inches from Tarrant and looming large despite his smaller stature. "Mourn them? I think not. They are the lucky ones, Tarrant." Avon took his arm then, his touch as gentle as his words were harsh. "They are the lucky ones."

Tarrant's anger drained away, leaving him with a vast hollow of anguish that would not support him. He sank, boneless, to the hard floor and buried his face in his bound hands; his tears flowed unchecked. With Avon's words echoing in his ears, he wasn't sure if he was crying for the dead or for the living.

* * *

Though they had no way to measure time, Tarrant judged that several hours had passed before the guards came back for them. They were marched through the corridors to another room, where Servalan and more guards awaited them. Tarrant looked around, puzzled. There was no interrogation machine, no medics armed with mind-distorting drugs. Nothing to indicate the purpose of this excursion. Avon was made to sit, still chained, in the room's one chair, and fastened securely to it with straps around his chest and arms. Tarrant stood a

little way in front of Avon, held tightly by a guard on either side.

"So, my dears," said Servalan, smiling brilliantly at them, "one game has ended and another, very different one will now begin. The two of you and your unfortunate little friends led me quite a merry chase. I think it is only fair that I should have some fun with you in return."

She turned to Avon. "Avon, you have only one—associate—left. You don't take very good care of them, do you? You killed Blake yourself and then managed to lose the rest of your crew. Tarrant is all you have now. I wonder how far you will be willing to go to keep him safe?"

Tarrant made a lunge in her direction, only to be stopped by the guards holding him. The trooper on his left released his hold long enough to backhand Tarrant across the face. Avon raised his eyebrows at the commotion, then turned back to Servalan with a disdainful sneer.

"If you wanted to arouse my protective instincts, such as they are," said Avon, "then you killed the wrong ones. I might have exerted myself for Dayna or Soolin. Possibly even for Vila. But Tarrant can take care of himself as well as I can. Inflicting unpleasantness on him will have no more effect than doing the same to me directly."

"But Avon," said Servalan archly, "isn't that precisely what you would say if you were trying to spare him that unpleasantness? No, I think we should give it a try and see what happens."

Avon shrugged, as well as he could while tied to the chair. "Please yourself."

"Oh, I shall, I shall," she assured him. "You know, your pretty pilot really is not in very good condition at the moment. His injuries from the crash are not fully healed, and rough treatment will aggravate them. Do you really want that?"

"What's the point of all this?" said Avon. He looked bored.

"Ah—now we come to the interesting part. Yes, Avon, there is a point. There is still something I want from you. But I can't tell you what it is; you must offer it to me of your own accord. It will take a bit of imagination on your part."

"Forget it." Avon stared off to the side, as if neither she, Tarrant, nor the guards were in the room with him at all.

"I see we must stimulate your thought processes." Servalan nodded to the guards. "You may begin."

They began by unlocking Tarrant's wrist chains and re-fastening them behind his back. Then, while two of them held his arms, the others took turns punching him. They alternated the blows to various parts of his body. When he was reeling back from a blow to the jaw, they would strike his unprotected midsection; when he tried to double over in reaction to that blow, they would attack his face again. Tarrant was glad that Avon was not watching him. He made a point of not crying out, but the sound of their fists slamming into his flesh was clearly audible.

The beating continued into eternity. His knees buckled, legs collapsing under him, and even the support of two of the troopers couldn't keep him on his feet. They pummelled him with their boots then. A blow to the side of his head detonated something in his skull. A sharp ringing filled his ears, and the continued jostling to his overstimulated nerve endings was only a minor annoyance compared to that deafening carillon. Tarrant wished that someone would douse the alarm, answer the comm prompter, or do whatever was necessary to terminate the incessant clamor. His lips moved to plead his cause; but before words formed, everything faded to a dense, silent black.

* * *

Avon's eyes roamed the cell, searching for any defect in design or execution that could be turned to their advantage. The oddly proportioned chamber, with walls that were twice as high as they were wide, was configured to play on a prisoner's psyche. It was like being at the bottom of a deep pit, or worse, like being trapped in an elongated specimen jar. Knowing that the effect was carefully calculated to demoralize the occupants didn't lessen the impact.

The amenities were scant: the waste disposal facility and a shallow sink. Both were molded metal with sensor controls. There were no parts that could be broken off and used for weapons or suicide devices. There were no bunks, chairs, or blankets; not even a cup to drink from. The heavy door, with its locking device on the outside, was impregnable. The air vents were narrow slits set high on the walls. Four security cameras fixed to the ceiling constantly surveyed the tiny area; though under the circumstances, that precaution seemed superfluous. The room didn't offer escape.

A stirring caught his attention, and his roving eyes paused to watch as his companion returned to consciousness. Tarrant's face was bruised upon bruises, injuries from the crash blending with the fresh discoloring and abrasions from the beating. During the moments before he fully regained his senses, his body and facial contortions mirrored his discomfort. Then furrows smoothed, and swollen lips turned up into an obligatory smile.

"Avon," Tarrant said, propping himself on one elbow and giving his head a slight shake. He still appeared dazed, but not so disoriented that he wasn't attempting to affect his best macho image.

Avon appreciated that. It had been disconcerting, earlier, to see Tarrant crying. "How are you feeling?" he asked, carefully keeping his voice dispassionate and even.

Tarrant rubbed at a spot behind his left ear. "Like I've just gone seven rounds with a Warg Strangler." His voice was sluggish and slurred; Avon had to strain to understand him.

As he stood, Tarrant's breath caught and his hand darted to his ribcage. "Same luxurious surroundings, I see. It's getting bor—" His words cut off and his slitted eyes grew distant and dark. Avon judged that he was remembering the executions or something equally grim.

"They brought dinner while you were...asleep." Avon pointed to where four unappetizing brown squares rested on the floor.

"My favorite."

"Then eat. You wouldn't want to disappoint the chef."

"Of course not," Tarrant said bitterly. He retrieved the food, settled against a wall, and began to nibble at a cracker. It took him a long time to consume one. After one bite of the second, he set the remainder aside and turned his attention back to Avon. "I don't suppose you've made any sense of our survival." Not waiting for a reply, he continued, "I think I've already told them everything I know."

Avon considered his own long hours of drugged interrogation and nodded. "That seems likely."

"Then I don't understand. What do they want?"

"I have no idea. Ask her."

"The Commissioner?" Tarrant's hand went back to massaging his head, the same spot as earlier. "If she thinks she has some use for us, it would be much simpler to recondition us than to try to force

our cooperation. And if they want an answer, why not ask a question? She said she wanted something."

"Tell me when you discover what that elusive *something* is. In the meantime, finish your food. You need to keep up your strength."

"Why? If what you've concluded is true, there doesn't seem much point to it."

"Just do it." Avon swiveled, putting his back to Tarrant, and refused to elaborate. He didn't know why he was urging Tarrant to eat anymore than he knew what Servalan wanted. In this case, survival was not a desirable option.

* * *

There were fleeting periods of clarity when the smothering of drugs had receded and before the pain swelled to distraction. The pattern had repeated often enough now that he was ready for it this time. He prepared to grasp the moment and make sense of the alternating currents that controlled him. Oh, he knew he had been injured and recognized the feel, sounds, and smells of a medical unit, but he didn't know the how, when, or where.

Jumbled visages somersaulted through his mind and a searing burned through his gut, but both were within his power to master. Using what little strength he had, he concentrated on the rolling pictures and slowed them until one image freeze-framed in his memory. It was a figure clothed in the black of space. Metal *stars* sparkled on the ebony fabric. There was a tenseness to the man's stance that indicated severe stress. That impression was accentuated by the gun gripped tightly in his hands and the tortured mask that was his face.

It was Avon.

Abruptly, the effigy shattered, splintering into a thousand whirling comets as a red hot explosion erupted in his abdomen. His hand instinctively moved toward the burning cauldron, but it could only twitch in place, anchored by an all-encompassing weakness that also locked the groan in his throat.

Coherent thought evaporated. Roj Blake was once again imprisoned in a fiery field of misery.

* * *

They were brought to the same room as before, the one in which he had been beaten into oblivion. Resigned to another clubbing, Tarrant was surprised when the guards shoved him, rather than Avon, into the restraining chair.

"What?"

Servalan noticed his confusion and strolled his way, remaining prudently out of reach until a trooper secured a strap about his chest. "You didn't think I'd bore myself with a repeat of yesterday, did you?" she asked. Her cat eyes glowed with a malicious hunger.

Tarrant kept his voice carefully nonchalant as he replied. "I haven't thought about you at all. I've been too busy enjoying your gracious hospitality and the accompanying gourmet cuisine."

"I'm sure you have." She smiled cordially. "And today's agenda should prove to be equally entertaining." She reached out to gouge a rough finger along the deep cut above his left eye. Tarrant flinched, and her touch immediately went from harsh to tender. "Have I hurt you? I am so sorry."

Servalan paced away, deliberately brushing against Avon as she crossed the room. "I've been remembering," she said with her back to both men, "how perceptive you were on Virn and have decided to give you a chance to demonstrate whether or not you are superior to Avon. Perhaps, my clever Tarrant, you'll do better than he did yesterday. He wasn't able to determine what I want. Can you?"

The guards were advancing on Avon. Tarrant scoured his mind for an answer to her question as the first blows struck. What was the elusive something that she wanted? She'd already sucked them dry of information under drugs. There wasn't anything of value that he could tell her. The only thing he could offer was... himself.

"If you must hurt someone, hurt me."

"How gallant!" Servalan mocked, spinning around. One of her hands raised, and the beating stopped. "Are you sure about this, Tarrant? Avon wasn't in any hurry to protect you yesterday. Are you sure you're up to being his curly-haired, sacrificial lamb?"

The eagerness in her voice caused Tarrant's stomach to convulse, but he nodded anyway. "Yes."

"Then far be it from me to deny you that opportunity." She flicked her wrist, indicating that the guards should free him. "It could prove amusing, finding out just how far you are willing to go for your callous shipmate."

They were herded into the corridor, with Tarrant studiously avoiding Avon's eyes. He knew without verification from Avon that he was stupidly playing into Servalan's hands and giving credence to her amoral games, but he couldn't help himself. He

simply didn't have the other man's degree of detachment.

Their new destination was only a short walk down the hallway. They were led into a room that contained an all too familiar device—a Federation interrogation machine—and another chair with built-in restraints. The chair was slightly different from its predecessor; it had molded handgrips fixed to the ends of armrests. When Avon was thrust in the direction of the interrogation device, Tarrant thought that his proposition had been for naught. Avon was methodically stripped and shackled to the altar-like platform, an offering to Servalan's perverse, internal gods. In the meantime, Tarrant was bound to the chair.

Servalan waited until they were both secured to explain.

"This little toy is something a Federation scientist recently devised. The chair and the interrogation machine are harmoniously linked to a single, finite power source. The system is controlled by the occupant of the chair. The power will automatically flow to the table, causing excruciating pain to Avon, unless you, Tarrant, consciously divert the current to the chair. Of course the pain will be transferred as well. It is a very simple mechanism, yet it epitomizes the ultimate test of altruism."

"Tarrant, don't cooperate."

"Avon sweet." Servalan sauntered to his side and brushed her fingers across the fluff of hair that protruded from beneath the apparatus fixed to his head. "Showing some concern for Tarrant at last?"

"Showing my disgust," he countered.

"Then let me encourage you to continue to speak your mind. I would never interfere with a person's right to express himself. That goes beyond all bounds of fairness."

Avon's lips ground together as he stubbornly refused to respond to her bait.

Servalan waited a few seconds, appearing disappointed when Avon didn't say anything else. "You seem to have grown tongue-tied," she tisked. "Then it is time to begin. Tarrant, can you reach the hand grips?" He demonstrated that he could. "Good. Now release them. Those are how you control the flow of current. By tightly clutching both, all current circulates to the chair. The less secure your hold, the less power is diverted. Disengaging completely...well, you can guess what that does, but we'll start by showing you."

Someone out of sight must have been at the primary activator because before Tarrant realized that the game had begun Avon's naked body was arching in a frozen tableau of pain. Quickly, Tarrant grabbed the control knobs, squeezing them as hard as he possibly could. The white heat was so sudden and so intense that he didn't immediately feel it. Then the numbed shock gave way to a burning sensation and something worse: the sickly sweet odor of singed flesh. The device wasn't merely simulating pain in his nerve endings, it was searing his hands.

Tarrant let go, gasping. Avon immediately tensed, writhing slightly, though the straps prevented most movement. Blood dribbled down the side of his mouth; he was biting through his lips or tongue, perhaps to keep from crying out. Shutting his eyes, Tarrant closed his fingers around the metal again. The heat rose quickly. Even prepared for it, the pain was almost more than he could bear. Only the tortured image of Avon locked onto the inside of his lids gave him the strength to hang on.

"Tarrant, I'll kill you for this," Avon snarled.

The pitifully impotent threat was evidence of how desperately uncomfortable Avon was to find himself spared at someone else's expense. It was almost humorous enough to make Tarrant laugh, except that he was preoccupied with holding his breath against the pain, sucking in short gasps of air only when reflex forced him to breathe. An inner storm brewed, roiling clouds of asphyxiating darkness mixed with lightning bolts of scorching agony. Tarrant wished for unconsciousness. He wished for death. Then he released the controls.

"You're a fool." Avon's voice rose on currents of pain.

Tarrant stared at his hands. Where they had been in contact with the metal, the skin was bright red. It was a surprise to discover so little actual damage. He had expected to find charred flesh bared to the bone. Still, he had to talk himself into regripping the handles, starting out with only a light squeeze that he tightened until Avon's body relaxed. Tarrant wasn't taking the full current, though his tender hands felt like he was. He tried to find a solution to their dilemma. Perhaps he could reach a balance on the distribution of power—a point where the pain would be bearable for both of them. After some experimentation, he conceded defeat. Either Avon was convulsively twitching about or Tarrant was hurting so badly that he couldn't maintain his hold.

Somewhere Avon found his voice again. "You are doing us both more harm than good," he scolded. "I want to escape from this madness, and I might need a working pilot to manage that. What she is doing to me is of no consequence. If your hands are inj—" He cut off, unable to continue when power returned fully to the interrogation machine.

"I can't," Tarrant sobbed. His hands were curled as if still clasping the controls. The cool air of the room didn't bring any relief to his pain. "I can't..."

"I didn't ask you to." It was a shriek that sent Tarrant's fingers scrabbling back to the handholds. The contact was brief, and the last that he managed to attempt.

* * *

Upon awakening Avon tentatively stretched each arm and leg one at a time before attempting more strenuous movement. While an interrogation machine caused no tangible damage, his thrashing in the restraints had been violent at times. The possibility of joint, muscle, or spinal injury was very real. Determining that while most of his body was sore everything appeared to work properly, Avon sat up.

He saw Tarrant slouched against the wall opposite the door. His hands rested palms up on his lap. Avon gave them only a cursory glance; the skin pulled tight across the Tarrant's face was evidence enough of their condition.

"I hope you've realized what a fool you are," Avon said.

Tarrant's voice was conspicuously controlled as he answered. "I thought those might be the first words out of your mouth. I w-wished I had had someone to make a wager with."

"In the future, I would prefer that you not do me any favors, especially when they involve cooperating with her ploys. If you had half a brain, you would realize...."

"Avon," Tarrant cut into his tirade, "they left a box by the door. I...I couldn't open it. It looks like a medkit."

"So it does."

A lingering weakness convinced Avon to crawl rather than walk to the box. The latch was bent, making it difficult to release; he could understand that it would have been impossible for Tarrant to open it given the state of his hands.

Inside there were only a few items: burn ointment, gauze and tape. He glowered at them silently. It appeared that rather than rebuke Tarrant for his behavior, he was going to be forced to tend to him. If Servalan thought that would stimulate feelings of regret or guilt, she was wrong.

Impatient, Tarrant struggled to his feet and walked toward Avon. "What is it?"

"Medical supplies." Avon picked up the tube and read the label to himself. "This appears to be an antiseptic. At least your hands won't become infected. Some of the ingredients suggest that it will also accelerate healing."

"I don't understand. Why would they care?"

"They don't. They just don't want you dying on them before time. Sit down so that I can get this over with."

Tarrant appeared discomfited to be the recipient of Avon's nursing; a point that Avon relished since he resented being forced into the role of medic. If Tarrant had resisted his reckless altruistic impulses, they would both have been spared this situation.

The hands were bad, with spots that were raw and oozing, and blisters that would be open wounds before they healed. Redness extended onto the backs, beyond what had actually touched the metal grips. At least the worst damage was confined to small areas. Any residual nerve damage would be slight and unlikely to hamper Tarrant's piloting, if he ever had the opportunity to practice his profession again.

"Thank you," Tarrant said when the gauze was taped into place.

"If this happens again, you will take care of it yourself."

Tarrant didn't answer. He just nodded, desolate...and probably also fighting persistent pain. He climbed awkwardly back to his feet while Avon returned the excess supplies to the medkit. Avon kept half an eye on him as Tarrant bent to get a drink from the sink. He had to stick his face under the faucet to catch the water since he couldn't use his hands as a cup. It was a small indignity, more insult than injury. But it grated on Avon to the point that when the cell door slid open a minute later, it was all he could do to restrain asking for a cup. Perhaps if Servalan herself hadn't been part of the entourage that trailed in, he would have asked. But he refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing him beg.

"You don't look well," she tutted, her eyes taking in both men at the same time. "It is a shame that neither of you had the good sense to cooperate. Since you didn't, I'm afraid that we'll have to continue to try to persuade you."

"Why don't you tell us what you want?" Tarrant asked wearily.

Servalan ignored his question. "The interrogation will continue, but we will concentrate on only one of you at a time. We have graciously decided to give you some say in determining which of you will receive our attention. There is a safeword to use when you feel you can bear no more. At that point, we will turn our attention to the other man. However," she continued, her one finger extending to emphasize the point, "there will be limitations imposed. Given unrestricted access to a safeword, Avon would employ it in the corridor on the way to interrogation. That would hardly be fair. So you will have a limit on how often you may use it in a given block of time. You won't know what those specifications of number and time are, encouraging you—I hope—to use the safeword option prudently."

On that, she spun about on her heel and walked to the door that was opening before she reached it. She exited, pausing to call back over her shoulder: "I almost forgot. The word is *betrayal*."

A shutter temporarily closed off all sensation. Avon found himself back in the tracking gallery, asking Blake whether he had betrayed him. The fool had answered ambiguously and paid the price for his stupidity.

"Must I constantly be surrounded by fools?" he muttered—he thought under his breath, but almost immediately there was a light touch on his shoulder. Tarrant was resting one of his bandaged hands there.

"It won't be a betrayal," he said, almost as if he were reading Avon's mind. "We're going to use that word, both of us. They broke us before and it will happen again. The only fight we can hope to win is to not let her manipulate us into hating each other."

"Divide and conquer hardly seems necessary when we are already conquered."

"I don't understand either," Tarrant said desolately. "But why else are they giving us even this limited opportunity to temporarily escape their persecution?"

"Why else, indeed?"

* * *

"It's called a rack, Avon," said Servalan with a smirk.

He was stretched painfully across a metal table, with his wrists and ankles chained at each end to winches. The function of the device was appalling clear to him. Its primitive simplicity made it all the more horrible; human beings had been tortured in this way for centuries, perhaps millennia.

"Begin," Servalan ordered, gesturing to the guards who stood at each end of the table. They twisted the winches so that the chains were pulled just a fraction tighter- not much, but enough to make Avon scream as his aching joints were put to even greater stress. For several seconds the room dissolved in a gray haze, then the pain ebbed to where he could focus again.

Servalan trailed her fingers across his naked stomach. "If you don't like it, you know what you can do to stop it. The word is easy to say."

"Burn in hell," said Avon. The expression on her face gave him a certain satisfaction. She turned away from him.

"One standard increment every ten minutes," she said to the guards, and swept out of the room.

Avon lay on the table, hurting and sweating. He was a little surprised at his reluctance to say the word. In part, of course, he simply hated to give Servalan the satisfaction. She must have made her choice of word very deliberately to remind him each time he considered using it of the most painful moments of his life—Anna's betrayal of him, Blake's seeming betrayal, his own inadvertent betrayal of Blake. And very soon now, his deliberate and considered betrayal of that gallant young idiot Tarrant.

It would be logical to use the word at once, to avoid further tissue damage. Tarrant's hands were almost healed. It would be ironic indeed if an opportunity for escape should be lost because Avon was unable to walk. On the other hand, no such opportunity seemed likely to occur any time soon, whereas more torture was a near-certainty. Servalan had hinted that they should be sparing in their use of the word. He decided to wait a little longer.

The next turn of the winch brought so much pain in his shoulders that he began to worry seriously about the possibility of dislocation. He distanced himself from the pain, as he had done when he was tortured on Earth; but the next escalation of the pain made that tactic impossible. At the third turn of the winch, something in his back

gave way. Avon screamed his throat raw as agony raced up and down his spine. It was time, definitely time.

"Betrayal," he said when he could get his breath. Betrayal of whom, he wondered dimly. The unfortunate Tarrant, certainly. His own self-opinion, perhaps. Blake and his ridiculous ideals...best not to think about that.

The pain abated only slightly when he was released from the restraints. He had waited far too long to use the word, and damage had been done that only time would heal. He could barely move. Although he was still more or less conscious, the guards had to carry him back to the cell. They ran their hands over his body in offensively familiar ways, but no further harm was done.

It would be Tarrant's turn next. Avon hoped that the young fool would not be as foolish as he himself had just been.

* * *

Fingers wrapped around Blake's left hand and a male voice said, "You're going to be fine. We're safe."

Safe where? From what? The questions formed easily enough but wouldn't transfer to his lips.

"What you need to do," the man continued, "is to relax and cooperate with your treatment. Deva has everything well in hand. Emergency evacuation proceeded as planned."

Deva Evacuation. His memory stirred by those words, his mind extrapolated more data. The base on Gauda Prime and the recruitment of criminals for the rebel army. A message that the Federation observers had arrived ahead of schedule and another unexpected visitor...Avon.

Avon shot me!

"Relax." The voice was sharper, insistent. "I'd rather not have to give you more drugs."

Then a female. "His vital signs indicate increased mental agitation."

Avon. That bastard Avon! Why? A warmth trickled into his arm. Anger blurred. He fought the medication, tried to swim above it, wanting desperately to strike out at something...no, at someone. At Avon.

* * *

After wetting the tip of his right index finger, Avon pressed it to the crumbs scattered about

the cell floor. He gathered every visible morsel, then stuck his finger in his mouth and licked it clean. Hunger gnawed at his belly. There was never enough to eat, except on the rare occasions when the Federation wanted to stretch their stomachs to make the periods of deprivation more acute. They had been served a cold but filling stew last meal period, making the current ration of one hard cracker each seem all the more meager.

The sensations of hunger were exacerbated by the chill of their cell. It seemed to have become progressively colder since he and Tarrant had first been imprisoned here, but perhaps that was an illusion created by the loss of their clothing, the gradual shrinkage of their starving bodies, and the debilitating effect of continual torture.

Avon had outwitted his enemies in one small way. The lighting of the cell was varied at random, with no relation to external day or night, in order to keep them disoriented. Nevertheless, he could vaguely estimate the passage of time. He used his whiskers as a rough measuring device. When their body odor became so rank that it disturbed their torturers, they were permitted frigid showers. Beard suppressants were included in their washing supplies. As smooth skin slowly gave way to stubble, Avon could approximate the passing of days.

It was a small triumph that didn't come close to balancing the many defeats, but it had boosted his morale. At the moment, however, it was having the opposite effect. Tarrant had been gone for a very long time, nearly a day, Avon calculated. It was the fourth day, approximately, since his own torture on the rack. He was able to move fairly easily now, but he was still suffering severe attacks of pain in his back and joints.

"N-no, no." The cell door had barely started to slide open when Tarrant's cries became audible. He was thrown into the cell, stumbling for several steps before sprawling onto the hard floor. A medkit skidded in after him, then the door slammed shut.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah." Words dissolved into an unintelligible mewling as Tarrant grabbed hold of his left leg. He ran his hands up and down the shin as if that might ease the pain in his calf. A terrible, barbed object that resembled a large fishhook was stuck through the calf muscle, protruding outward in two directions. It was a grappling hook that dock workers throughout the galaxy used to move large crates. The sharp, barbarous prongs extended from one side of Tarrant's calf, the handle from the other.

Swallowing his disgust, Avon reached for the medkit. But as he moved toward Tarrant the other man began to frantically wave him away. "Go...go...go. Don't touch me." He kicked out with his right leg and Avon barely dodged the blow.

"I can't help you if you don't let me get close."

"No-o-o-o." Tarrant's eyes were glazed ovals that appeared to be nervously and aimlessly darting about the room.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes. No." His hands raked through his grimy tangle of curls as he squinted in Avon's direction. "They gave me something. Wh-who are you?"

"Avon," he answered gently.

"Avon. Avon." Tarrant took a deep breath, then repeated for a third time, "Avon. Drugs. I'm seeing...seeing horrible creatures. But they pass right through me. I think it might be a mirage."

"It's a hallucination," Avon confirmed, relieved that Tarrant had regained some sense of reality.

"I know." Tears began running down Tarrant's cheeks as he continued. "But it's so real. I'm tired. I hurt. I want to die."

"That's the drug speaking."

"I think I used the safeword. I'm so confused. I'm sorry. They are going to torture you next."

"Didn't you say that we would both use it, and that we shouldn't hold that against each other."

"Did I...?" Tarrant's question cut off to a scream, and he crossed his arms protectively in front of his face. He tensed for perhaps half a minute, then took a cautious look behind him. "It's gone."

"There is nothing in this room except the two of us. I need to treat your leg. You are going to have to be still. Do you think you can manage that?"

"It hurts."

"It will not feel better until the hook is removed."

Avon rummaged through the kit, exhaling a relieved sigh when he found a hypodermic that contained a pain reliever. He started once again toward Tarrant but froze to a stop almost immediately when a sharp pain tore through his back. Pain ran up and down his spinal column like a flame licking at the bone. He barely stifled a groan and a curse. He would need his full strength,

or as much of it as might be left to him, to get the hook out of Tarrant's leg. With his back in spasm, it would be impossible. His shoulders and arms, and even his hands, were affected too; he might not have the manual strength and control that would be necessary to remove the hook without causing more harm than good.

Tarrant's tears and sobbing increased. His hands returned to his injured leg. The painkiller would help him, but only temporarily, and there was no way to know when more analgesics would be provided. It was more important to cure the problem than to offer him fleeting comfort.

Grinding his teeth together, Avon pressed the hypospray to his own skin and activated the release. The convulsions in his back quieted, then faded almost completely away. After that, he didn't allow himself to think. He didn't allow himself to hear. He didn't allow himself to feel. He only acted.

After pushing Tarrant flat on his belly, he sat on the younger man's thigh to hold his leg steady. The handle side of the tool was simply a metal pipe set into a socket. It was a tight fit, but it could be removed. Then the entire device could be pulled free in the same direction in which it had been inserted, sparing Tarrant's leg the gruesome return trip of the barbed hook.

It was an arduous task that Avon had assigned himself. The metal pipe was wedged securely in place. It wouldn't do to have it slipping about when being used as a dock tool. He patiently wriggled it left and right, straining with all his might to dislodge it. Sometimes his effort caused him to jerk it. He sensed rather than heard Tarrant's sharp screams when that happened. Finally he eased the handle free and gently pulled the hook out of the mutilated, oozing tissue. After a quick glance at the gore-coated metal, he threw the bloody monstrosity across the room, unaware that his own cries of rage were now mingling with Tarrant's cries of pain. He poured antiseptic into the open wounds and imagined he heard it sizzle as it contacted exposed nerves, but that didn't stop him from giving the areas a good soaking. Everything was mechanical and remote. He might have been working on a computer rather than a human being.

After taping thick pads in place, he moved to the side and surveyed his companion. Tarrant's naked body was trembling; mucous ran from his mouth and his nose. He was alternately moaning piteously and pleading for someone to help him. It

was a slow eternity before that gave way to whimpers, then finally to blessed silence. Avon felt his beard must have grown an inch during the interim.

As he settled into a position to try to sleep, he could only hope that the drug that caused the hallucinations would also act as an amnesiac, and that Tarrant would have no memory of his mental or physical torments when he woke up.

* * *

Blake looked up into Deva's stern face. It was a familiar mix of concern and frustration that gave away his thoughts. "You always warned me that it would come to this," Blake rasped out.

Deva snorted. "And the warning always fell on deaf ears. I hope...I hope this harsh lesson has made a point."

"Not to worry," Blake assured him, "I shan't be playing bounty hunter again."

"Which isn't to say that you won't find an equally risky endeavor to occupy you when you're up and about."

"Rebellion is a dangerous business, Deva. We both know that."

"Yes, we do." Deva swiped a hand across his brow, absentmindedly reaching for the fall of red hair that for once was already swept back where it belonged. "Would you like the rest of my report now?" he asked. "The medics have allowed me five minutes, no more. Less, if you don't behave yourself."

Blake hesitated. The beginning of Deva's story had been grim: that Arlen had been a Federation agent and had initiated an attack against the base. "Go on," he finally said, knowing he had to hear the worst sooner or later.

The statistics were not as bad as he feared. The emergency withdrawal had been smoother than anyone could have expected under the circumstances. Seven lives were lost. A dozen injuries were severe enough to require recovery time in the ship's medical section.

"Yours was the most serious," Deva noted. "It was touch and go for days."

"I hadn't realized that." Despite a resolution to stay calm, Blake found that his fingers were curling into a fist. "What about Avon?"

"I wondered when you'd ask." Deva paced away then back again. "He is currently a guest of the Federation."

"What?" Blake hadn't expected that.

"I was unconscious, a stun charge. Freiser supervised the evacuation. It was a very rushed affair, as you might imagine. He didn't have time to do more than follow procedure, which was to pull as many of our people as possible out. It was nothing short of a miracle that none of our group still alive were left behind."

"And he didn't recognize Avon, of course."

"No. Nor Avon's crew. Nor Arlen, for that matter. Everyone who knew she joined us—thought she'd joined us—was dead or unconscious."

"I should have circulated information on them." The now completely formed fist pounded into the mattress. "We had scanned images of Avon and Vila from their arrest records, one of Tarrant from his military days, as well as detailed descriptions of the women."

"Blake, calm down. What's done is done. It's regrettable that the Federation has access to Avon's knowledge, but how much can one man tell them?"

"His knowledge?" Blake lifted onto his elbows. "His fucking knowledge be damned! I wanted him here. Here, to find out why...." Pain lanced through him and choked off his voice. He fell back onto the mattress, gasping.

"Here, here." Berisha rushed into the room, alerted by the monitoring device. "Deva, you'll have to leave. Now."

"Avon." Blake was carried away on a fresh wave of agony, the one word frozen on his lips.

* * *

Sometimes, Tarrant thought the waiting was the most agonizing part of Servalan's game. When he was being tortured, there was seldom energy for anything except reacting, or trying not to react, to the senseless brutality. But this—this isolation while Avon was her victim—stretched to a millennium of emotional turmoil. He felt both relief to be spared attention and guilt that Avon was suffering. And lurking behind those obvious sentiments was the never-ending dread that this time the torturers would go to far, leaving Tarrant perpetually alone.

He shuddered and looked around, as always, aware of the constant surveillance.

Is she watching me now and gloating over any obvious distress?

That possibility charged him into action. With effort, he forced a wry smile to spread across

his face. If she thought she had beaten him, he'd prove her wrong. Using the wall for support, he struggled to his feet. There were never enough of the analgesics to fully dampen his physical torments. Pain was his constant companion, and his body had compensated by adopting a slow, tenuous rhythm that pampered his crippled frame. His paces across the small cell were a stilted mockery of his former long stride, but each step reinforced his determination to come out the victor in this perverse contest.

The exercise served a purpose that he hadn't anticipated. It left him exhausted enough to fall asleep, huddled in a curled ball against the cold. When a clanking woke him, it was several seconds before he could urge his stiffened limbs into motion. By then the cell door was already slamming shut.

Tarrant didn't immediately look to where Avon was probably sprawled just inside the door. First he allowed himself a moment of mental preparation. He was never eager to discover what ingenious persecution the sadists had chosen for any given session.

When he did nudge his body around, he was surprised to see that Avon was moving. That was unusual; ordinarily each of them was returned to the cell unconscious or close to it. It was, after all, the logical conclusion to a torture session, which generally continued until the victim was no longer able to respond...or until he used the safeword.

Perhaps Avon had used it this session. That he had been gone a very long time didn't exclude the possibility that it had eventually been torn from his lips.

Tarrant had tried to persuade himself that if he were going to use the safeword at all, he should do it early on, to avoid physical damage that might hinder an eventual escape. But somehow he found it very difficult to do the rational thing. Again and again he endured such pain that even without hallucinogenic drugs he was barely rational by the time he mumbled the word. He suspected that Avon, contrary to his own advice, was doing something similar. Certainly there were as many bruises, burns, cuts, and welts on the other man's body as on his own.

This time, though, Avon appeared to be less battered than was normal in such circumstances. Tarrant could detect no new injuries among the old, half-healed ones—nothing, at least, that would account for the painful slowness with which Avon

was dragging himself across the floor. He had clearly been hurt, but it was not obvious how.

Then Tarrant caught sight of Avon's face and flinched uncontrollably. There was a new darkness in those haunted eyes. It spoke of unimaginable horrors.

"What happened?" Tarrant blurted out.

They avoided discussing the individual tortures that they had endured. And, of course, neither of them had commented on the other's injuries except as was necessary for medical treatment. Stoicism and pride had combined with mutual guilt over the use of the safeword to keep them both silent. But now all of those instinctively set rules were wiped away in one pounding heartbeat. This torture needed to be defined before it burned a deep path of surrender through Tarrant's carefully maintained defenses. If Servalan could reduce Avon to this state, there was surely no hope for either of them.

"Stay away from me," Avon growled, inching into the nearest corner while keeping a wary eye on his companion.

There was enough of Avon's old fire to give Tarrant pause. Then he remembered how his cellmate had forced him to endure treatment when he would have preferred to die.

"You must be hurt," Tarrant suggested, gesturing to the expected box of medical supplies that the guards had left. He crawled toward where the other man huddled against the wall. "Let me help."

"There is no help."

Was that catch in Avon's voice a sob? Flustered by that possibility, Tarrant made an abrupt change of direction and headed for the medkit. The contents of the box would give him some hint regarding Avon's injuries. It was always stocked with precisely what was needed.

The instruments inside the case caused Tarrant's respiration to quicken perceptibly. Three related items rested in individual niches. A small booklet, probably instructions, was tucked into a fourth, narrow slit. Tarrant ignored it, gazing at the trio of components. The main part was definitely a medscope, of larger proportions than the common type used to examine the outer ear canal. The two smaller articles were specialized attachments for it: a scanning tool and a healer.

For a second Tarrant stared at the equipment in bewilderment. He could not imagine what it was

to be used for. Then it began to dawn on him. His brain had been momentarily slowed by pain and cold, and perhaps by an unwarranted assumption that there were things even Federation torturers wouldn't do. If Avon appeared relatively undamaged externally, it must be because the damage was internal. There were only two orifices on the male body that would accommodate such a scope, and Tarrant was certain that it was not Avon's mouth or throat that had been ravaged. With an inward shudder, he wondered whether the instrument of rape had been organic or inorganic. Then he forced himself to face the necessity of treating Avon, with no idea how to even broach the subject.

Gnawing on the inside of one cheek, he picked up the medkit and glanced at his companion. The man was pressed into the angle where the walls met, his legs doubled up against his abdomen, shuddering.

There was no way of easing what was going to be a humiliating experience except to keep his own emotions under strict control. Tarrant approached the matter directly.

"We both know what happened," Tarrant began, slithering closer to the other man, "and there is nothing that's going to change that."

"Stay away from me."

"Why? So that you can die from untreated injuries? You've told me that we have to stay alive so that we can make her pay."

"I've changed m-my mind."

There was the slightest tremble to Avon's lips, the slightest stutter in his voice. Tarrant steeled himself against the pity that the uncharacteristic evidence of vulnerability provoked. "I don't think dying is an option for us," he said reasonably. "If you don't allow me to help, I suspect that she will force treatment." He made a motion to back away. "Maybe you'd prefer her medics to handle this...."

"No! No." The first was a snarl, the second a whispered utterance of despair. Then Avon's eyes went blank and shocky. "She'll never let us go. Never let us die."

"I don't believe that. She'll eventually tire of us. Or," Tarrant forced a confidence that he didn't feel into his voice, "they'll make a mistake. But we have to be alive and as well as possible to take advantage of that." He reached forward with a hand, not quite daring to touch Avon but wanting to show his concern. "Avon, please...."

There was no response. The traumatized man stared silently into the distance. Tarrant withdrew his hand and started over again, striving to sound as calm and rational as possible. "Those medkits are supposed to be used immediately. I don't know what exactly was done or how bad the damage is, but odds are I can treat it with this if I do it now." The pilot tried desperately to recall what little he had ever heard about the possible consequences of anal rape. "If you let it go untreated, there may be internal bleeding or infection, and that I can't handle. Either you'll go to Servalan's people again, or you'll die horribly." He paused. "And then I'll be all alone, with no one to help me," he added. Ashamed at having betrayed his own fear, he hurried on: "You must have had medical examinations before. This won't be so very different; I'll be as careful as I can."

Something, and Tarrant was never sure what, got through. Slowly the muscles on Avon's face firmed, returning the mask of cold indifference to its rightful place but not quite quelling the fright that pooled moisture in the dark eyes.

"Do what you must," said Avon. He turned and lay on his stomach in front of Tarrant, with his face buried in his folded arms.

"That's good," Tarrant said reassuringly. He glanced at the manual. "Now pull your legs up under you, with your knees bent. Yes, that's right."

With his patient in this humiliating but necessary position, Tarrant could see the evidence of intimate injury: the pale ass and inner thighs were marred by the crusted remnants of blood and other fluids. Though he tried to be gentle, just as he had promised, the first touch of the instrument brought a gasp of pain. Tarrant struggled to remain as detached as possible, for both their sakes. He tried very hard not to think about what it was going to feel like when, as he was almost certain it would, what had been done to Avon happened to him as well.

* * *

Blake stared at the chaos on the monitor. Avon shot him. Once. Twice. Three times. Tensing at each burst, real pain smoldered in Blake's mangled chest in response to the attack. It sharpened his desire to strike back, but his target was out of reach. It was only a little consolation that Avon was in Federation hands and paying dearly for the many sins of his past. Personal revenge would

have been much more satisfying. When he reached the point where Avon appeared to be smiling directly—and grimly—into the surveillance camera, Blake clicked the controls in his hand. The preset vid disk automatically started a replay from the moment when Avon first entered the tracking gallery. Blake had watched the four-minute sequence countless times since Deva had reluctantly given him the disk. He expected to watch it countless more.

Freiser, good soldier that he was, had pulled all the priority files from the base computer before destroying it. Included was the running log of the surveillance recordings for several days. Blake had reviewed the material and returned the disks except this last.

"Not that again." There was marked disapproval in Deva's voice as he strolled into the infirmary. "There is no point to this continuous self immolation. The incident is over. Put it behind you."

Blake slammed the off button darkening the screen. "Put it behind me," he repeated venomously. "How would you feel in my place? If you had been the unarmed victim and I the man wielding the gun?"

Deva started for a second, then he shook his head, dismissing the possibility. "That would never happen."

"Don't be so sure. In my worst nightmare, I couldn't have imagined Avon's shooting me. I trusted him as a man trusts his right arm."

"I knew you had a special regard for him, but I hadn't realized it extended beyond the professional to the personal. What I've heard of Avon suggested that he wasn't easy to like."

"He wasn't," Blake admitted. "But I did... like him." Emotional pain as sharp as the darts in his chest stabbed through him.

Deva moved closer, spreading his hands over Blake's shoulders and massaging the tense muscles of his upper back. "Tell me about it. Perhaps talking will help."

Blake sighed and leaned forward slightly, relaxing under Deva's gentle touch. "I've known betrayal before. Dev Tarrant. Maxis Creed," he spat out the name.

"He paid in kind," Deva said, bitterness tainting his voice.

Reaching back, Blake patted his friend's hand. "That he did. For once, the devil got his due."

And from the looks of the tape, any honors that Arlen would have earned for her duplicity will have to be awarded posthumously."

"Avon is also receiving due punishment, of longer duration and intensity than even Creed's ordeal. The Federation are nothing if not thorough."

"But not for the right reasons." Blake gently thumped his bandaged chest. "Not for this. And I'm not there to see it. It's not over, Deva. I don't know if it will ever be over."

* * *

Tarrant had stopped screaming a little while ago, when his throat grew so raw that venting his agony became a torture in itself. Now the only sounds were the thwacks marking each blow of the whip against his body, and his stifled moans as the metal barbs knotted into the multiple thongs of the whip cut into his flesh. He should have used the safe word long ago; he wasn't sure that he could say it understandably any more. If only they would stop and let him catch his breath, he might be able to speak.

Miraculously, the blows ceased. Tarrant was released from the shackles that had held him upright and dropped to the floor. He lay sprawled face down on the cold surface, amazed to feel any sensation other than pain. He could hear the torturers moving about behind him and thought that perhaps he should turn to face them. But when he pressed his hands against the floor, as a preliminary to raising his body or at least rolling over, the only result was pain shooting through his arms. The tormented muscles were devoid of strength. His legs, when he tried them, were equally useless. He lay completely helpless, as limp as a child's soft toy, while his mind seethed with frustration and the first stirrings of panic.

Booted feet kicked his legs a little further apart.

"That was business," said a cheerful voice. "Now for pleasure. We're going to find out whether you're as fun to fuck as your friend. Got anything to say about it?"

A hand knotted in Tarrant's curls and jerked his head up. He stared dazedly at one of the torturers. This was it, then. At last the suspense was over.

If Avon could take it, I can, Tarrant told himself. He didn't feel very brave, though. He

could sense his useless limbs trembling as he remembered the ugly wounds he had tended.

"Want to be fucked, then? Fine. Let us know if you change your mind." His hair was released abruptly and his face hit the floor painfully. Meanwhile, someone was spreading his buttocks and prodding his anus with blunt fingers.

"I dunno," said another voice. "He's awfully tight, and we didn't bring any lube. If you don't want your dick rubbed raw, better open him up a bit first."

"Here, I'll do it. Hand me the whip."

The fingers touching him were replaced by a large object. There was no pain at first, only an odd sensation of pressure. Then, suddenly, he was being penetrated and torn. He cried out, a hoarse croak that he scarcely recognized as his own voice, and tried vainly to pull away from the intruder. One of the men took hold of his hips and held him in place, not to restrain him—there was no need for that—but to keep his body from sliding across the floor. The pain increased steadily. Tarrant felt as if he was being split apart. How big had the whip handle been? Surely if a man could grip it securely, it couldn't be as large as it felt inside him.

The pain abated as the thing was retracted, then flared up once more as it was rammed into him again, even more vigorously than before.

"Work it around—loosen him up good," said a voice. There was no reply, but the attack on his rectum intensified.

Tarrant didn't think he had been drugged this time, but pain and weakness were having much the same effect. He was trapped in a nightmare. In a dream it didn't matter what you said.

When he tried to speak, the first sounds that emerged from his lips were unintelligible.

"What's that? Speak up!" His attackers laughed merrily.

"Betrayal," he gasped. There, it was out. Let them take Avon instead. Tarrant felt irrationally ashamed of what he had just done, but the shame was only one more pain to bear.

The rhythmic churning of his innards continued. Why didn't they stop? Tarrant felt a sudden, sickening certainty even before he heard the laughter.

"Tough luck, kiddo. You've overshot your quota. Lost track when you were drugged, I expect."

"Stop!" Tarrant screamed desperately. "I'll do what you want, whatever it is! I said it! Betrayal! Betrayal!" Each word burned his throat.

For a split second he thought he had won the respite he had paid for so dearly, as the whip handle was pulled out of him. Then he felt the pressure of a heavy body atop his own and the pain of a new invasion. He willed his limbs to move, but the only result was a feeble twitching. His body had been beaten into total compliance. Tarrant thought that he would rather die than be used as a mindless toy; but at the moment, dying was not an option.

As each of them used him in turn, Tarrant withdrew from the here and now and thought of what would happen on his return to the cell. He would suffer the same unavoidable humiliation at Avon's hands that Avon had at his. But had Avon been so agonizingly helpless when he was raped? He'd been able to move afterwards, so presumably he would have been able to fight them. They must have tied him down or taken turns holding him. Tarrant wondered vaguely which was worse, being forced into submission by restraints or by sheer bodily weakness. He certainly didn't feel very manly at the moment.

The second and third rapes were a little less painful than the first; perhaps he was becoming accustomed to it. But the fourth time was bad again, and the fifth even worse than the first. Having seen the damage done to Avon made it all too easy to imagine what was happening to his own body.

Presently he became aware that the weight on his body was gone and the active stimulation of the pain had ceased. He felt only a tremendous ache. Was it over, then? He realized that he was crying, and had been for some time. His emotions on overload, his sense of violation was only a remote buzz. Remembering Avon's tormented reaction to rape, Tarrant wasn't sorry to be distanced from the mental repercussions of his ordeal. Perhaps it was better that it had happened after he had been whipped to the point of total collapse.

He was distracted from his internal rambling by the murmur of voices behind him. The torturers were chatting with each other, taking a break from their work. Gradually he became aware of what they were saying.

"You know what that whip reminds me of? Ever hear about the bead trick?"

"The what trick?"

"Beads. A string of beads. Or you can do it with knots in a thinweave scarf, I've heard. It's a special trick you can get in some brothels. These smooth little beads go up your ass, see, and just when things get really hot, the hooker pulls out the whole string, one at a time. They say there's nothing like it—feels like you're coming all over again for every damn bead."

"So what? What's this about brothels?" said a third voice irritably. "Don't tell me you're horny again already."

"Think that place in town would do it?" a fourth voice inquired.

"You'll have to ask them. But see, I was thinking we could do our own version of the trick on Curly here. Make him scream for every one of those little barbs."

"What, stuff it up him?"

"I get it—and then we'd pull it out, right? Sounds good, if we can get it all in. You hold him open, then."

They surrounded him once more. He was still completely unable to move, to fight, to escape, to resist in any way. He existed for their amusement. They held his cheeks wide apart and pushed the barbed strands into him, one by one. He felt horrible little stabs of pain as the barbs caught at the abused sphincter or pressed against the fragile tissues inside. Each of the whip's nine thongs was slowly pushed into him.

"Now what?"

"Now we take it out again, stupid. Slow, so he can feel it."

The handle protruding from him was jiggled about, so that the tangled mass moved agonizingly inside him. Then it was twisted and pulled. Slowly the barbs came free, scratching and tearing as they were pulled away from the flesh they had been embedded in. Tarrant heard himself making sounds that were barely recognizable as human.

Suddenly the pain escalated so sharply that he was shocked into silence. The world began to dissolve around him, and the voices receded into the distance.

"Damn! Look at all that blood. I think we've got a problem."

"Call Medical now. You know what happens if we lose one."

They actually sounded frightened, Tarrant thought in faint surprise as he slipped gratefully into unconsciousness.

* * *

Blake eased gingerly from the bed, using his arms to push off to avoid straining his still tender abdominal area. The wounds were closed and healing, but it would be weeks to months before he would be free of all discomfort. He accepted that and the limitations it imposed with transparent rancor. Now that he was mobile, he wanted to be at full strength and able to pursue his goals without qualification.

But he knew better than to overdo. Miscalculating his physical capability had landed him back in medical less than twenty-four hours after his first release. Since then, he vented his excess mental energy in the form of verbal furies, with Deva usually serving the role of hapless target.

Anyone except Deva would have torn his head off in retaliation days ago.

Blake smiled at the thought and found the smile reflected back at him in the mirror on his bathroom wall. He didn't smile often these days, and he'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

He washed and dressed slowly. That kept the pain tolerable and allowed him to walk with normal gait and posture to the cubbyhole that had become his office. He'd forgotten how cramped shipboard life was, spoiled by the long months on a spacious land base.

Every day his first item of business was to check for reports on Avon. And every day the same blank computer screen presented itself. None of his rebel contacts had new information. Avon was a prisoner in a maximum security Federation interrogation facility; its location was a carefully guarded secret.

Blake stared at the solid field of blue and found an unidentifiable emotion tickling at him, in the manner of a feather brushed lightly beneath the nose. It was so faint that it might have been imperceptible except along with the flutter there was an absence. An absence of the anger that normally accompanied any contemplation of Avon.

Not allowing himself to consider why, he calculated the span of time since Gauda Prime. Seventy-three days. A long time to be at the mercy of the Federation. What could they be doing? Even someone as stubborn and determined as Avon would have been thoroughly broken weeks earlier. And even someone with as much valuable information as

Avon had to share would have provided it in detail long before now.

What was happening? If he had been executed, that would have been reported, as the deaths of three of his companions had been, with a full visual transmission of the carnage. A tightness gripped Blake as he recalled Vila's final, terrified moments. Deva had warned him not to watch the event, but Blake, to his later regret, hadn't heeded that advice. He was left with that tragic memory of Vila burned in his brain. Time, he knew, would make it less vivid and allow him to recall happier moments, but for now it was crystalline sharp in every gory detail.

Trying to quell those raw images, Blake resolutely brought his focus back to Avon. Why was he still alive? Were they conditioning him? That was a possibility, and he made a mental note to research the length such a process would take based on current Federation methods and technology. It would be useless to reference his own experience. Those recollections were hazy and the procedure was being continually refined.

Avon wasn't dead. If he wasn't undergoing mind manipulation, what did that leave?

An answer to that question exploded on Blake like a lightning bolt on a cloudless day.

He wouldn't.... Not even Avon, the epitome of pragmatism, would actively cooperate with the Federation.

* * *

Avon stared at the shaking body on the floor. Tarrant was still soaking wet, his curls plastered against his skull. The medkit had supplied nothing this time but a mild stimulant. That had brought Tarrant around sufficiently to let him spew up a remarkable amount of water. Now, though, he seemed to be weakening again. He was coughing and wheezing, breathing in labored gasps and drifting in and out of awareness.

Avon could guess at what had happened. He'd heard of an unofficial Federation technique sometimes used on prisoners who had to remain undamaged in appearance: immersing the victim in water until reflex action forced him to inhale, resuscitating him, and repeating the procedure. It was a dangerous game, though, all too likely to kill an already weakened prisoner. Tarrant needed medical attention badly.

But there was nothing to be had: no more medication, not even a towel to dry him or a blanket to protect him from the cold of the cell. As Avon watched, Tarrant shivered convulsively and rolled himself into a ball, curling his limbs loosely against his body. His pale, damp skin had an unhealthy blue cast to it; he looked as if he might be going into shock.

Avon was cold himself—as well as tired, sore, hungry, and dirty, and accustomed by now to think of those conditions as normal. But he was at least dry and breathing easily; far better off, for the moment, than his pathetic wreck of a cellmate.

Briefly Avon cursed the young fool for not having used the damned safeword before things went so far. But his mind quickly veered away from that dangerous subject. However he considered it, he himself had failed equally. Weakness had made him ask that Tarrant be taken in his stead; sentiment had made him wait too long before he did so.

It occurred to him that perhaps friction could help to dry some of the moisture. He reached hesitantly toward Tarrant's shoulder, feeling a little uneasy.

Despite all that had happened to them, they had so far managed to avoid touching each other except insofar as necessary to perform specific medical procedures. It had evolved into an odd sort of courtesy, the last scrap of human dignity left to them. They might be manhandled daily by the torturers, but with each other they were always decorous. Though each of them had been forced by necessity to become thoroughly familiar with the other's body, they had nevertheless contrived to maintain a sense of reserve.

Now, it seemed to Avon, he was on the verge of transgressing some unspoken rule. He shoved the thought aside. This was no time for a foolish consistency of etiquette; survival was more important. Tarrant needed warmth, and Avon was the only possible source of it. This, too, was a necessary medical procedure.

Avon rubbed his hand back and forth on Tarrant's upper arm. The slight warmth generated by the friction felt pleasant to him; he hoped that Tarrant could feel it as well. After a time he shifted to the thigh and rubbed there. When he had worked his way around the parts of the huddled body that he could reach, he gently unfolded the curled limbs and massaged them, one by one. Tarrant was more or less conscious and cooperating, though still very

weak and racked with bouts of coughing. The hand toweling seemed to help him a bit; certainly he was less damp now, and his color was a little better.

Avon considered what to do next. He was becoming too tired himself to keep this up for much longer. There was an obvious solution, albeit a distasteful one. Tarrant was lying on his side on the floor once again. Avon lay down close behind him, his eyes level with the young man's sodden hair. The metal floor was like ice against his bare skin; the frigid decking would be sapping the last of Tarrant's warmth and energy. But as beneficial as it would be for both of them, Avon couldn't traverse the final inches that separated their bodies.

Breathing deeply, he tried to work past his reluctance. He had no practice in physical expressions of platonic affection. Hugs and kisses in friendship went against his nature. He'd always considered such sentimental exhibitions a weakness that rational men were above. Yet he now wished he had some former experience to call on, something that would make this necessary flesh-to-flesh contact to share body heat more natural, or at least less repulsive.

Tarrant mewled as a spasm of cold or pain shuddered through him, and Avon's resolve strengthened. The longer he delayed, the weaker Tarrant grew. It wasn't as if the outcome of his internal struggle wasn't inevitable. His mind knew what had to be done; therefore, his averse body would be forced to comply. He closed the gap and pressed his torso against Tarrant's back, molding himself to the contours of the other man's body to provide maximum contact, while wrapping his arms about the thin chest.

His action brought an immediate reaction, a strong and irrational one. Tarrant cried out in distress, pulling away and struggling to break Avon's hold on him. With an inward cringe, Avon realized why. They had both learned from numerous recent experiences that the close proximity of another male body was an inevitable prelude to pain and humiliation. The computer tech almost smiled at the bitterness of the irony. Thanks to his own torture, he was probably no sexual threat to anyone by now; but Tarrant's subconscious had no way of knowing that. This wasn't going to work.

He moved around so that he lay facing Tarrant, placed a hand against one cold, bestubbed cheek, and prodded gently.

"Tarrant, look at me."

Bleary blue eyes came open and regarded him warily.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm trying to keep you warm." Honesty compelled him to add, "I'm trying to keep us both warm."

He slipped his hand around to the back of Tarrant's neck and exerted a slight pressure. There was a moment of hesitation, and then Tarrant eased into his embrace. The damp mop of curls lodged under his chin, and an arm snaked around his waist. After another brief pause, the wiry body pressed against his and the legs entwined with his own.

Tarrant sighed, coughed a little, and then lay quietly in Avon's arms. As much for his own sake as for Tarrant's, Avon used his fingers to comb through the wet hair, trying to speed its drying. Presently he tired of that and lay still, enjoying the warmth that even Tarrant's pitifully abused body was able to give him. He drifted into a stupor, not actually sleeping but deliberately tuning out his surroundings.

Then there were bright lights and noise, and the warm body that he clung to was pulled away from him. He tried to hold on but was slapped for his pains. Tarrant was dragged off to some new torture, and Avon was left more alone than ever before.

* * *

Avalon took two steps for every one of Blake's, but he was the one puffing up every slope. The mile plus stretch between Avalon's base and the landing field where his ship awaited him was a challenge after his long convalescence.

"Are you sure you don't want me to call for a rover?" she asked while waiting for him at the top of a rise.

"No...no. I need the exercise." He reached the crest and paused, leaning forward with his hands braced above his knees. His heart was banging against his ribcage as if eager to escape the rickety body that housed it. "Just...give me...minute to recover."

"We're almost there." She pointed to where the well worn path meandered into a stand of trees. "You'll see your ship once we get around that bend in the trail."

"Good."

"You know you'd be welcome to join our group."

"I know." He straightened, drawing in a deep breath at the same time. The crisp morning air was a welcome change after the recycled atmosphere of past weeks, but he wasn't tempted to stay. Gauda Prime had left him overwrought and tense. For now, he preferred the mobility that the ship offered to a permanent base.

"Where will you go?"

"That I don't know." Another legacy of Gauda Prime was an indecisiveness and uncertainty. "I appreciate the supplies. I'll replace them when I can."

"There's no need." At a gesture from him, Avalon resumed the journey, keeping to a deliberately slow pace. "We'll be leaving here soon, anyway," she added. "The local resistance is strong enough to carry on without our assistance now." She sighed. "It's slow going, one planet at a time."

"And not very encouraging when you see some fall back under the yoke of the Federation," Blake mused.

"Horizon, Charvat...", Avalon ticked off two names and stopped. "There are days...."

"Yes," Blake agreed readily. "And on those days it is very encouraging to know that you're not alone." He rested his hand on her shoulder. "It's good to have friends during troubled times."

She reached to pat his hand just before he removed it. "You were there when I needed you."

They walked through the thin grove of trees to the open area where the grass was burnt brown from ships' exhausts. Avalon paused on the edge of the blast circle to say her good-bye.

"There's one thing, Blake," she said, hesitant. "I wasn't sure whether to mention this, but it's been on my mind. It's about what happened on your base. I've listened to what you and your people had to say, watched your security tapes, and I can't help thinking that it is possible that Arlen wasn't working alone."

"Arlen not working alone," he echoed, his conscience twinging as he considered the consequences of his bringing Arlen onto his base. If she had accomplices...if the debacle would have happened regardless of his misjudgment...perhaps he could salvage his lost confidence.

"It ties in with your suspicions regarding Avon. I agree with you that only conditioning or active cooperation can account for his continued survival. But what if it goes beyond that? Is it possible that he formed an alliance with the Federation before coming to Gauda Prime? It would

explain the unlikely coincidence of Federation troops arriving hard on his heels."

"No." Blake shook his head. "That's not possible. Avon's ship was attacked. Mortally wounded." *But Avon escaped that without trouble.* "No," he repeated. "The tapes don't suggest such an alliance."

"Which is why I was reluctant to say anything. I'm growing too suspicious." Avalon gripped his hand in her small one. "Take care of yourself," she said.

"You do the same." He traversed the final meters to the open hatch with one thought tickling at him. Arlen was a young, junior rank officer. Was it likely that the Federation would have put full responsibility for such an important operation in her hands alone?

Then he dismissed the notion with a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders. Dev Tarrant had been working alone. The traitor in Avalon's band had been working alone. The Federation had established a pattern of individual infiltrators.

* * *

Avon winced as another boot crashed into his ribs. He lay curled on his side, trying to give himself what little protection he could from the blows raining down on him. His hands were manacled in front of him, not because there was any real need to restrain him, but simply as an added humiliation. He was far too weak to fight back. He thought there had been serious damage already, but he was too confused to be certain.

In the lucid moments between bursts of pain, Avon thought of the safeword. Betrayal. He had said it so often that it hardly hurt any more. It had been some time since he used it last; it might work. But was there really any point in saying it? True, it might make the pain stop. But there was another, better way to end it. If he held out, if he refused to say the word, would they keep up the beating until they killed him? He thought it was a real possibility.

Avon's fantasies of escape were long gone. He had told Tarrant at the beginning of this ordeal that there was no hope for them, but he had not quite believed it then. Now he did. Death was the only escape. If he could remain silent, he might achieve it.

There was a cracking sound over his right kidney, accompanied by a pain that was quickly growing more distant. But before he could succumb

to the numbing blackness, a needle was jabbed into his arm. Almost immediately, he was hyper alert. Drug-induced tremors shivered through his body, and the molestation continued.

He was pleased to be forced back to full consciousness. Without their medication, he would have passed out and been returned to his cell, possibly before he achieved his goal. But their determination to extend his punishment beyond human endurance might ultimately work against them. Avon relished each successive burning prick to arm, thigh, or buttocks that jolted him back to full awareness. He was growing giddy on the combination of pain and drugs, and feeling ever more confident that his scheme would prove successful.

As the battering continued, he felt a slight twinge of regret at abandoning Tarrant to their mercies. How ironic that he had once tried to avoid saying the word out of a misplaced sense of obligation to his last remaining shipmate. Now he was enduring the pain purely for his own sake. Perhaps, once he was gone, Tarrant would be sensible enough to follow his example. Then again, that family never was very practical.

There was a bitter little smile on Avon's face when a blow to the back of the head extinguished all his deliberations.

* * *

"Avon?" Tarrant whispered the query. There wasn't any response. He hadn't really expected one. Tarrant moved his fingers away from the fluttering pulse point at Avon's wrist and gently ran his hand up the length of the other man's arm. "Damn it, Avon."

It had been a long time since Avon had been returned to the cell. A long time unconscious. And, if anything, he appeared to be growing weaker, sinking deeper into a comatose state.

Tarrant glanced at the pitifully inadequate medkit. He'd used the supplies to treat the visible injuries, but antiseptic pads and an antique tissue regenerator were only effective for the most superficial of damage. Without more sophisticated tools, Tarrant couldn't begin to diagnose or treat what he suspected to be a possibly fatal condition. The external bruises to head and torso were severe enough to suggest critical, corresponding, internal damage. Or it was possible that Avon's body was

simply collapsing under the strain of cumulative abuse.

Surely the people manning the monitors had reported Avon's prolonged unconsciousness to Servalan or her appointed underling. Why weren't they providing medical support? The time when Tarrant had hemorrhaged severely, after the first gang rape, he'd been taken to an infirmary, treated and transfused. So where were the medics now?

Tarrant resisted calling for help because part of him believed that dying was the merciful alternative to continued persecution. Hadn't Avon said that Dayna, Soolin, and Vila were the lucky ones?

And if Tarrant were left alone.... Well, he couldn't let himself think about that.

There was no more he could do. Tarrant lowered himself to the floor beside Avon and wrapped himself protectively around the still body. He pulled Avon up against him, positioning them so that the unconscious man was cradled in his arms, his back resting against Tarrant's chest. Avon was a mass of sharp bones, with only a thin layer of flesh to cushion them; but then, Tarrant himself was in much the same condition.

He and Avon had become mirrors of each other, partners in suffering. Each of them had lived through the same tortures twice, once in his own person and again by proxy when he tended the body of the other. Any inhibitions about touching had long since vanished. Each had held the other's trembling body in his arms, as they clung together for what pitiful comfort they could provide each other. Tarrant didn't think he was likely to outlast Avon by long; abuse severe enough to undermine Avon's stubborn will to live would be only slightly allayed by his own youth and stamina.

Though he hadn't intended to, Tarrant slipped into a light sleep, fading away on the most ludicrous of thoughts: if they died now, together, their skeletons would possibly be locked in a symmetric embrace for eternity. How Avon would have hated that.

"Well isn't this cozy?"

Tarrant heard the words, recognized the voice, but didn't open his eyes.

A shoe prodded his backside. "I'm afraid this sweet lullaby must end. I need you, Tarrant."

"No. No more. Go away."

There was a swish of cloth as Servalan moved about, then the hard muzzle of a gun pressed against his lower spine.

"I really don't have time to argue with you, my dear. Unless you'd like a paralyzing charge in the backbone, I suggest you get moving."

It wasn't the threat that budged him, it was the realization that something was different. If Servalan was inclined to another torture session, why didn't she simply have her guards haul him off against his will?

As he opened his eyes and eased onto his back, her gun maintained contact with his body, drifting along his skin until it stopped near his navel. Tarrant blinked and looked around. There were no guards, only Servalan.

"That's right," she said, noting his puzzled expression. "I'm alone." She stood and nodded to the unmoving security cameras. "And surveillance is turned off."

Tarrant stared up into her golden eyes and decided that this was finally the end. He found that he was too benumbed to feel either regret or relief over his impending death. "What, no audience for the grand finale? Just a girl and her gun."

"Quite the opposite. I have a proposition for you: your life in return for a minor service."

"I'm not interested." Tarrant moved to roll back onto his side. Servalan prevented that by placing her left foot on his midsection. The stiletto heel dug painfully into his gut.

"Listen," she said, the gun aimed at his head now. "I've kept you alive, Tarrant, and you owe me. My superiors ordered summary execution for all of you. I persuaded them to minimize the waste. I pointed out that you and Avon, as the strongest, could be useful in testing various interrogation techniques."

"You expect gratitude for that?" He bared his teeth and continued, "I only hope that I get a chance to repay your kindness."

"You won't if you're dead, which you will be very soon if you don't come with me. I need a pilot, and you're the only one that I trust."

Tarrant felt a first faint flicker of interest. "Has your luck finally run out, commissioner? Pity about that. Tell me more."

She appeared reluctant to confide in him, but then with a disdainful shrug of her shoulders said, "My identity has been compromised. Thanks to a providentially placed confidant, however, I have a

few hours before the local situation becomes critical. There's a ship primed and waiting. It only needs a pilot." On the last word, she backed away, freeing Tarrant.

Tarrant very much wanted to turn her down. She deserved the worst possible of fates. But the old adage of *biting off your nose to spite your face* held his tongue. "What do I get out of it?"

"I thought I explained that—your freedom. Now stand up. We don't have long."

Bracing his hands against the floor for support, Tarrant managed to raise his back from the deck. His arms were like jelly, quivering with strain, and black dots of giddiness peppered across his vision. Though his body was faltering, his mind forged a path around his weakness and concentrated on the essentials of survival.

"If discretion is advised," he said in the cockiest voice he could muster, "won't two naked men be a bit conspicuous? You better get us some clothes. And I'll be needing a stimulant, something fast acting."

"Clothes and a stimulant for you, yes. But I'm afraid that Avon won't be coming with us. We don't have time to be transporting a corpse."

"He's not dead yet. And I won't be going anywhere without him."

"We could all end up dead from the delay."

"Yes, well, that doesn't particularly disturb me. Death and I have grown rather close of late. It's your decision, both of us or neither of us."

"He betrayed you, Tarrant. Many times. Over and over, he told us to torture you instead of him."

"So did I. It was mutual. And since you would have done what you did anyway, it hardly matters what you made us say. What I'm saying now is, two or none."

There was only a moment's hesitation. "Very well." She moved toward the door. "See if you can wake him."

There was no waking Avon, of course. Tarrant was surprised by each consecutive breath that the tech managed. Expecting anything more was quite absurd. Instead of wasting energy on a futile attempt to rouse Avon, he lowered himself back to the floor and rested until Servalan returned.

Partially revitalized by the stimulant she supplied, he managed to get into a Federation uniform without too much difficulty. Dressing Avon

was a more arduous task and required occasional one-handed assistance from Servalan.

"You're really going to have to put the gun away now," Tarrant said when the last article of clothing was in place. "Thanks to your rigorous fitness program, I can't manage Avon by myself. You'll have to help me carry him."

"Do you think I'm stupid? Without the gun what's to stop you from overpowering me and taking off alone?"

"My word. I give you my word to see you safely somewhere...as long as I have your full cooperation in caring for Avon."

"You are remarkably loyal to a man who has given so little in return." She made an inexplicable gesture with her hands, then tucked the gun into a pocket in her flowing skirt. "Well...", she prompted ungraciously, "let's get on with it."

"Good." Tarrant smiled wearily.

"Not quite that good," she countered. "Your philanthropy is complicating our ability to move unchallenged through the base. This may be night shift, but we will still see people as we make our way to the ship. What will their reaction be to a commissioner performing mutoid labor?"

"Oh, I'm sure you're clever enough to come up with a plausible explanation for that." He bent down and gripped Avon's upper arms. "Now if you'll get his legs..."

* * *

After being so long naked, clothing felt unnatural, confining, and uncomfortable to Tarrant. Every time he moved, some portion of cloth chafed against his skin, more likely than not against an area still tender from torture. It was an effort to push those distractions aside as his fingers fluttered over the controls, engaging the landing sequence.

Retros primed, he mentally walked himself through the methodical routine.

Shields on full deflection.

Stabilizers green.

The familiar maneuvers were soothing. He could almost forget that back in the medical unit Avon's vital signs were floundering in the critical range.

Servalan burst onto the flight deck, fighting her way to the second pilot's position as the ship pitched in atmospheric turbulence.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "We can't be anywhere near Liticek yet."

"A small detour."

"I didn't authorize that. Turn this ship around."

Tarrant spared her a short glance. "Avon needs medical attention. A physician. He'll die without it."

"Avon! I might have known. For an intelligent man, you are entirely irrational at times."

"I won't argue that. I seem to recall a time that I let you go."

"If I didn't need a pilot...."

"We had an agreement, Servalan. My services in return for two lives. We wouldn't be here if it weren't necessary. I'm not being insubordinate for the sheer hell of it. I'll get you to Liticek."

"You better. And just where is this unscheduled stop taking place?"

"Destri Minor. The system is under Vandor control, well away from Federation space. We should be safe. I've arranged to have an emergency medical team waiting for us. I'll need credits to pay them."

"And I suppose that you expect me to provide them. I think we need to have a talk about who's in charge."

"Not now. Unless you'd like to be responsible for a very rough landing, I suggest you strap in and shut up."

* * *

The violet night sky of Destri Minor was paling with the first hint of dawn as the medical team climbed into their waiting cart. Tarrant watched them for half a minute before activating the mechanism that would pull in the sloped gangway and seal the hatch.

From behind him, Servalan's voice grated across his raw and aching nerves. "We are leaving. Now."

"We can't." He was too tired to argue; he'd simply refuse to launch the ship.

"We can and we will, you fool. Didn't you see anything? They know something."

"They were understandably suspicious, given Avon's assorted injuries, but I think they believed my story."

"They pretended to believe your story," Servalan sneered, "and a lame excuse for a story it was. You found him adrift in a lifepod, and you don't know what happened to him? Ridiculous! I tell you, they've recognized us. I know they have.

Within a day our enemies—and let me remind you that they are many—will be breathing down our necks. The Federation wants me, Vandor wants you, and the rebels want the man who shot Blake."

"You think they recognized us?" Tarrant responded with a shrug. He turned to her, his eyes caressing her smooth, flawless features. "Well, you do have a memorable face. Let's hope that information on our identities is slow to stray beyond local gossip because we are not leaving. Avon needs at least forty-eight hours of medical supervision, more than we are qualified to provide."

He tried to brush past her; she wouldn't let him. "Orac can manage that," she announced.

"Orac!" Tarrant wobbled and had to reach for the bulkhead for support. The vigil during Avon's surgery had drained the last of his reserves. He was fatigued to the point where he couldn't see straight. He was not at all recovered from the debilitations of the torture, and the strain of running the ship and caring for Avon had totally exhausted him. And all the time Orac had been on board and could have handled one chore or the other.

"You didn't think I'd leave it for the Federation?"

"No, no. Apparently I didn't think at all. I'll try to do better."

"Stop babbling and get us out of here." She gave him a soft push. "Go. I'll see to Orac."

* * *

Tarrant rubbed his hand over his face, deliberately rough in an attempt to jar his weariness away. Twenty-four hours to Liticek. Avon was finally out of danger, but that wasn't enough to guarantee his continued survival. Servalan would strike. She wasn't the type to leave witnesses.

"There you are." Servalan strolled into the lounge, dressed in yet another long, formal gown. This one clung tight and didn't leave much to the imagination. "I thought you'd be in your cabin," she said while walking to where he sat. "Shouldn't you be getting some rest? Orac reports storms on Liticek. I'll want you fresh for what might prove to be a difficult landing."

"I'll manage." He picked up his cup and took a long swallow of the hot beverage he had selected minutes earlier. Neither its taste nor his memory could call up its name. "What will you do there?"

She slid into the seat beside him, saying, "You don't really expect me to answer that question."

"No..., I was just trying to make polite conversation."

"That's very interesting. It gives me some hope." Her hand moved to his shoulder and began to graze slowly along his arm. "I have a second proposition. I'd like you to stay with me. Be my pilot, be my ally. Together, Tarrant, we could watch each other's back and have someone to trust."

Her proposal served to do what the supposed stimulant in his drink had failed to accomplish; it brushed the cobwebs of exhaustion away from his brain. His perceptions clearer, he stared at her, suspecting that she was starting to set him up for the kill. There was no sign of trickery in her eyes, but there was the elusive hint of another emotion. It took him a long moment to identify it.

"You're afraid," he blurted out.

"Of course not." She said it so quickly that he knew her denial to be a lie. "What would I have to be afraid of?"

"The loss of power and security. You're in another old cellar. You'd have to be desperate to come to me for help. You're hoping that I'll prove sympathetic, as I was on Virn."

"I know you better than to expect sympathy—all your protective instincts are focussed on Avon. I'm appealing to your intellect, not your emotions. Think about Avon. Would he do for you what you've done for him?"

"I trust Avon."

"And you don't trust me," Servalan finished.

"That's right. Our bargain ends at Liticek. I'll be glad to see the last of you."

Very slowly and deliberately she lifted her hand from his arm. "Very well, but I promise you that I would have made a more faithful companion than Avon. He will betray you. He isn't capable of the type of loyalty that you offer him. And you won't find any sympathy from the rebels either. They will learn what happened to Blake. I just offered you your one chance at safety. You'll remember that you turned it down some day."

Servalan was goading him. Tarrant knew it. But that didn't take the sting from her venomous words. His fingers ached to strike back. She was so small and so close. It would be easy to reach over and snap her neck. Much easier than trying to evade whatever scheme she had planned to end their lives on Liticek.

No one would know he did it.

No one would know he had broken his word.

No one except himself.

Tarrant willed his body to relax. He answered her in a deliberately light voice. "If you survive and I don't, you can say you told me so."

* * *

They were still in the upper levels of the atmosphere, but so far the descent to Liticek was smooth. The cloud cover below promised that would change, and Tarrant was actually pleased with the pending challenge. He glanced sideways to where Servalan was relaxed in the auxiliary pilot position. She appeared not to have a care in the world beyond maintaining an impeccable appearance, as she sat absently filing one fingernail after another.

Tarrant grinned to himself, then released the controls. Immediately, the ship dipped to a steeper angle and picked up speed.

"Wh—?" The muffled word caught in Servalan's throat as she dropped the file and clutched the armrests. Her face shot around to glare at Tarrant.

He didn't give her a chance to speak. "Hand me your gun," he demanded, "the one you keep in your pocket."

She wasn't stupid; he'd grant her that. She grasped the situation immediately. "You'll kill all of us," she said, regaining her cool as quickly as she had lost it.

"I think Avon and I are dead men anyway. The gun, please. You have about...oh, two minutes to make a decision. After that, I doubt even a talented pilot like myself could prevent a crash."

Servalan reached for the controls at her position only to discover that he'd disconnected her access.

"I don't think you could have landed it, not with the storm," he explained, "but you might have been able to establish an orbit. That's one minute and counting...."

"I thought Avon was the paranoid one," she snarled while reaching into her deep pocket for the small gun that she favored. She practically threw it onto the console in front of Tarrant.

He tucked it between the side of his chair and his hipbone before returning his hands to the instruments. She'd left it close, but he had known she would.

Servalan appeared to have every confidence in him as he struggled to regain control. There was no evidence of being in a ship plunging to a hard fall as she calmly inquired, "Isn't this a bit much after all we've been through? I thought we had an agreement. Or are you breaking your word?"

Concentrating on the task at hand, it was some time before Tarrant could indulge in the distraction of answering her. "I'm going to keep my word," he said when he'd re-established their landing glide. "But I didn't trust that you'd keep yours."

"Whatever makes you happy," she said ungraciously. "But you disappoint me. The longer I know you, the more I realize what a poor judge of character you are. That could prove to be a very fatal flaw. If you'll recall, I'm the one who kept you alive when the Federation wanted to execute you."

"I've never believed that story about testing interrogation methods. You wouldn't know if they worked or not, or how well they worked. No one even asked me any questions. Your pretense of wanting information from us was a lie too. I think you only wanted to enjoy our pain."

"The safeword, Tarrant. That's how we could gauge which methods worked best. Neither of you wanted the other hurt in his place. With you it was because you cared. For Avon it was a matter of pride. We knew you would only use the safety clause when under maximum duress, simulating a situation similar to real interrogation. Even if you guessed our purpose, you would still have tried not to use the word."

"That's crazy."

"It is brilliant, and you know it. I will give you this. You and Avon were even more stubborn about using the safeword than we expected—quite the stoic pair."

"I still don't trust you."

"Well, since you have the gun, you really don't have to. I shall leave peacefully. With Orac, of course. You and Avon will be free to pursue your own destinies."

* * *

Tarrant tapped out another emergency broadcast. They'd been drifting in space for over two days. The explosion in the power core had damaged the ventilator as well as the drive mechanism, and the oxygen shortage had reached a critical level. While they could drift indefinitely, the

ship would become a floating tomb before much longer.

If Avon had been awake and alert, they probably wouldn't be in this predicament. His suspicious nature would have fathomed the trick up Servalan's sleeve. She had probably been laughing behind his back when he had thought he had outwitted her. She'd strolled away from the ship, knowing that the charges she'd left behind would do her dirty work for her.

Tarrant sucked in air with difficulty. It required an effort to breathe, and his lungs never felt satisfied. He had hooked Avon to an oxygen feed just minutes ago, fearing the additional strain would otherwise kill the man.

"Damn, d—" Tarrant cut off his despondent cursing when a voice boomed across the deck.

"This is independent freighter **Tagmany**, receiving your distress signal. Please state coordinates and nature of your problem."

Hand trembling, Tarrant pressed the button to answer. He had been fully prepared for their luck to continue its downward slide, deciding that if they were found it would be by a Federation ship. But this was a civilian vessel. He could only hope it was close enough to make a difference.

"This is Del Tarrant," he began, too exhausted to lie. "We need your help...quickly."

* * *

Avon ascended into a state where he wasn't quite awake but close enough to it to know that he preferred sleep. Sleep was the only peace, the only time he was free of pain. The stimulation from that small thought was enough to nudge him further along the path to full consciousness. His first physical perception was that his mouth was very dry. He made small motions with his lips and tongue to stir the flow of saliva.

"Are you awake, Avon?" It was Tarrant's voice, hushed to a whisper.

"Mmm." He intended a nod to go along with that, but he wasn't sure he managed the gesture. "Water," he mouthed.

"I'll get you something."

Good, Tarrant had managed to read his lips.

His head was raised and something eased into his mouth. It took him a second to recognize that it was a straw and a second longer to remember the sucking action needed to use it. Cool, fresh

water flowed into his mouth. It was a very strange sensation.

"That's probably enough for now," Tarrant said, withdrawing the straw and lowering Avon at the same time.

Avon opened his eyes to protest, and then it hit him. A straw? He was in a bed. Tarrant was wearing clothing, some sort of pajamas. He was half turned away, depositing a glass tumbler on a table to the side. He turned back almost immediately, a wan smile on his face.

"I imagine you have two thousand questions," he said, settling onto a high stool in the manner of someone whose body was rubbery with fatigue. "I'll try to answer the most urgent ones. We are out of Federation hands and safe."

Safe. Avon blinked away the moisture that trickled into his eyes in response to that word. *Safe? No more torture, no more rapes.*

"Really," Tarrant added, guessing that it would be hard for him to accept the concept. "We're in a rebel medical facility. I insisted on staying with you until you woke up. I knew you'd only believe this news if it came from me. Avon, do you understand what I'm telling you? We are safe, in rebel hands." The way Tarrant emphasized the word *rebel* and the grim cast to his blue eyes made the unspoken warning crystal clear.

"Yes."

Tarrant looked doubtful for a moment, then gave a short nod. "Good."

"How...?"

"That's a very long story. Now's not the time to tell it." Tarrant's head twitched, gesturing back over his shoulder to indicate that they might not have complete privacy. "I should get the medics. They'll want to poke and prod for a bit. I'll stay close by."

"N-no need."

"I think there is. You are very weak. If they have questions, it's best that I'm around to answer them for you." On that, he slipped off the chair and brushed through the filmy curtain surrounding the bed.

Avon felt a familiar, overwhelming urge to toss Tarrant onto his backside. The young idiot was afraid that he'd let something slip—something indiscreet concerning Gauda Prime. Of the two of them, Avon had no doubt about who was least likely to blurt out potentially incriminating information. Still, it was some consolation that Tarrant was erring

on the side of caution rather than his usual bent for recklessness.

Tarrant was soon back, a step behind a benevolent-looking blonde woman in white. "This is Dr. Gramway," he introduced.

Avon allowed his mind and body to float in a semi-stuporous state during the examination. It wasn't difficult. He was totally without strength. Even keeping his eyes open required an effort that he couldn't manage for long. Alert for it, he roused to hear the doctor's concluding prognosis. "He's going to be fine."

Footsteps clicked away. Avon summoned energy to open his eyes. He caught Tarrant by surprise as the young man was easing back onto his perch.

"You're awake?"

Avon didn't bother to answer the obvious. He couldn't lift his hand, but he managed to point a finger in Tarrant's direction. "You...go sleep. You look like h-hell."

Tarrant's thin, bruised, haggard face brightened and a chuckle burst from his lips. "Since I'm not a vindictive man, I won't get a hand mirror to show you what *hell* really looks like." He reached forward to squeeze Avon's shoulder, growing serious at the same time. "I'm glad you're all right. You had me worried."

Then he lounged back on the stool and crossed his arms, clearly intending to stay and appearing smugly satisfied with his deliberate act of disobedience.

* * *

"You never told me how we escaped." Released from the critical care unit, Avon now shared an infirmary room with Tarrant.

"Didn't I?" Tarrant swung his legs around so that he was perched on the side of his bed facing Avon. His blue eyes were restless. "There was a crisis on the base. It gave me the opportunity to get to a ship." He smiled weakly. "We were lucky."

"We must have been."

"You were in bad shape," Tarrant cut in quickly, before Avon could voice the question forming on his lips. "Did I tell you about the stop I made to get you medical care?"

"You haven't told me anything," Avon said wryly.

"I landed on Destri Minor, but I was afraid to stay for long. It's Vandor territory." There was

a moment's hesitation. "Then I had trouble with the ship. We were drifting. Fortunately for us, it was our hosts who answered my distress call. I wasn't sorry to reach this refuge."

"That's a remarkably brief accounting."

"Well, you know me, Avon, modest to a fault. To expound on all the brave deeds I performed to spirit you to safety goes against my nature. Suffice to say that you would feel deeply in my debt."

"My hero."

"Something like that." Tarrant rubbed his hands up and down his thighs, then eased gingerly from the bed. "I think I'll stretch my legs," he decided. After working his feet into a pair of slippers, he steered a path to the door.

Avon rolled onto his side, enjoying a moment's peace and privacy. While his body was slowly recovering, his emotions were still painfully brittle. A sudden noise or a raised voice, and his muscles would tense with anticipation of torture.

He recognized that Tarrant was also still walking a tightrope of insecurity. His moods would seesaw between overly cheerful and dark silence. Avon guessed that his frequent excursions were more to confirm the concept of being free than to exercise joints that throbbed even during rest.

* * *

They had been together for so long that it was easy for Blake to recognize Deva's mood. He was agitated to the point of being distracted. After rushing in with an urgency that suggested a dangerous shipboard fire, he had turned his attention to the blank notepad held loosely in his left hand. His eyes were distant; his lips unmoving.

"Deva," Blake prodded gently, "what's the problem?"

It was enough to attract his friend's attention. Projecting a calm demeanor that was more artificial than real, the red-haired man said, "It's not a problem. At least I don't think it is." He paused briefly, then met Blake's eyes. "I've just received a startling dispatch."

"Maybe it would be best if you sat down." Blake pointed to the empty chair beside his desk.

Deva gingerly settled onto the hard plastic, then blurted out his news. "Avalon has obtained information about Avon."

"Avon." Blake's breath caught on the one word. He felt the familiar throbbing through his

veins that indicated a sudden rise in blood pressure. "Has he been executed?"

"On the contrary, he has apparently escaped his Federation captors. His current place of residence is a rebel enclave on Gondar."

Blake's initial reaction was one of great happiness. Avon was alive and safe. That emotion had barely registered when it mutated swiftly, sweeping through a rush of suspicion to a sense of profound anger. The anger was born out of personal hurt. He had to curb it and focus on the question of Avon's loyalty. "He could be working for the Federation."

"Do you think so?" Deva sounded genuinely surprised.

Blake dearly wanted to answer with a forceful *no*, but honesty compelled him to admit, "I don't know. He's been in the Federation's clutches for a long time."

"Ah...," Deva's hands twisted nervously about each other, and he visibly had to force his next words out. "It is possible that they've tampered with his mind."

"As they did mine," Blake said, trying to put Deva at ease. "It's all right to talk about it, really."

"They violated you, Blake."

"Avoiding the subject will not change that. And it is a concern that definitely needs to be investigated after Avon's extended incarceration. Has the group on Gondar considered the possibility?"

"I really couldn't say. Avalon was brief. She didn't want to compromise the secured channel with a lengthy transmission."

"We'll have to contact her, then." Blake reached for the comm unit on his desk. Deva's hand shot out to block the move.

"It would be better to approach the Gondar rebels directly. Avalon provided codes, but they only monitor incoming channels at certain times. We won't be able to reach them until 0940 ship's time."

"That long," Blake said, and he knew he wasn't referring to passing along a judicious warning. He desperately wanted more news on Avon. For what reason, he wasn't entirely certain.

* * *

Tarrant lay on his bunk, shifting positions repeatedly in a vain attempt to sleep.

The bed was comfortable, and he was tired. Falling asleep should have been easy. He needed the

sleep, too; he knew that he still was not completely recovered from his ordeal, even though both he and Avon had been declared fit enough to leave the infirmary. The rooms they had been given were pleasant ones, a gracious gesture on the part of their hosts. Yet Tarrant still felt restless.

Several nights ago he had stopped wearing the pajamas he had been given. That had helped. Tarrant would never have admitted it to anyone, but he still felt a little awkward in clothing. Nakedness—in the privacy of a warm room, of course, with no one to observe or comment—was oddly comforting. A warm drink before bed helped a little, too, but it still wasn't quite enough.

Tarrant forced himself to lie still under the bed covers and to imagine ideal circumstances for sleep. Warm—safe—relaxed—what more could he want?

And suddenly he knew. For what must have been many weeks, perhaps even months, he had slept with another human body in his arms—a body that had become so familiar to him that it was almost part of himself. Of course he felt strange without it.

He wondered whether there was the slightest chance that Avon felt the same way. There was only one way to find out. He glanced at the chronometer. It was still not too very late; Avon might wake up awake, pondering the complexities of the house's computer systems.

Tarrant dressed quickly and forced himself out into the corridor before he lost his nerve. Moments later he was knocking hesitantly at Avon's door.

"Who is it?" So Avon was awake.

"It's me, Tarrant."

"Come in." The voice was neutral, neither threatening nor welcoming; the door was unlocked.

Avon was lying in bed with his hands behind his head, as if he had perhaps been staring at the ceiling, lost in thought, when Tarrant knocked. The covers were pulled up to his armpits, but he did not seem to be wearing any nightclothes. Tarrant felt a tiny burst of hope. In one respect, at least, Avon's response to their recent experience seemed to be similar to his own.

Avon reached out with one hand, turned the lights up slightly, and regarded Tarrant.

"Well?"

Tarrant licked his lips. "Avon, I can't sleep."

It sounded ridiculous. He regretted the words as soon as he had spoken them. But what else could he say?

"There are many remedies for that. Have you spoken to the medics?" Avon maintained his neutral tone. Tarrant knew all too well that he could easily have given the words a mocking edge, and appreciated the fact that he refrained from doing so.

"I don't think that would help. I've been thinking about it, Avon."

A quirked eyebrow invited him to continue.

"It's you I need." There, it was out. For a fraction of a second, Avon actually looked surprised. Then his face returned to its neutral expression, guarded but not actively hostile.

"I miss the way we used to sleep," Tarrant went on in a rush. "It's foolish, I know, but there it is. Avon, could you please—I mean, would you let me—"

He stopped, confused and embarrassed. There was a long moment of silence. Tarrant waited in miserable suspense for the withering verbal tirade he was sure would follow. Finally Avon spoke.

"Oh, very well," said Avon grudgingly. "Take off your clothes, though. I don't want seams and fasteners digging into me."

Tarrant was delighted to comply. Years ago he had been trained to fold everything neatly as he took it off, but now he simply shed his clothing in a heap on the floor. He was a little afraid that Avon might change his mind. But the other man dimmed the lights to their former level and held up the covers in a gesture that was far more welcoming than his words had been. Gratefully Tarrant slid into the bed beside him.

They fell easily and naturally into the pattern they had developed in their cell, holding each other close for the maximum sharing of body heat. Sometimes one of them had curled around the other, but most often they had lain just as they did now: facing each other with their bodies pressed together and their limbs entwined. But this time the familiar and reassuring sensations were subtly different. The hair that brushed against Tarrant's cheek was soft and clean and smelt faintly of soap, and the warm body in his arms was as whole and undamaged as his own. They were lying not on a cold, hard floor but on a comfortable mattress, with the covers pulled over them to make a cozy nest. Against all odds, the imaginary haven that they had tried so

desperately to create for each other in that frigid cell had become real.

Tarrant could not resist stroking Avon's shoulder. During their captivity the gesture had been one of comfort and sympathy, but now it was more a sign of mutual congratulation.

We made it.

There was an answering pressure from Avon's hand against his back, brief but unmistakable. Tarrant fell asleep smiling.

*

He awoke to a sensation so unfamiliar that at first he barely recognized it: he was too warm. Two closely huddled bodies, well insulated by blankets, were actually generating excessive heat.

Then Tarrant made a second discovery: he had an enormous, throbbing hard-on.

And a third: so did Avon.

Tarrant's first reaction was relief—*Everything still works!*—closely followed by panic—*Avon will be furious.* But as he woke up a little further and assessed the situation more clearly, he noted that Avon was making no move at all, even though the sound of the other man's breathing indicated that he was most likely awake. Rationally, there was surely no reason for Avon to be angry. They were already completely familiar with every intimate detail of each other's bodies, save only this one; and was it really any surprise that they should mirror each other in recovery as they had done in suffering? But what, if anything, should he do about it?

With his uppermost arm Tarrant pushed away most of the bedclothes, giving himself relief from the excess heat. Instead of wrapping his arm back over Avon, though, he pulled slightly away from the other body, just enough so they could look each other in the eyes.

Avon was wide awake, staring calmly back at Tarrant. The look of haunted misery in his dark eyes had receded, though it was not quite gone and probably never would be. But the expression that had replaced it was unreadable. Tarrant had no idea what Avon was thinking.

He was suddenly uncomfortably aware that the body next to his own was that of another man, and a man nearly as large and strong as himself. Unpleasant memories of sexual assaults by other male bodies tumbled through his mind. Until this minute it had never consciously occurred to him to associate Avon in any way with the rapists. In Servalan's dungeon, the two of them had been so

battered that any sexual function was out of the question. Pain and exhaustion had made neuters of them both. Now, however, unmistakable evidence of Avon's maleness was pressing against him.

Whatever misgivings might be flowing through Tarrant's conscious mind, his body knew very well what it wanted. The bond that had formed between him and Avon had, it seemed, affected his sexual tastes profoundly. Suddenly, his libido was telling him very clearly that Avon, for so long his sole source of comfort and companionship, was the most desirable creature in the universe. The only question was how to convey his feelings to Avon in a way that would be as unthreatening as possible. Avon had, after all, the same reasons for discomfort with the idea that Tarrant did, as well as a history of violent reactions to unwelcome suggestions.

Very cautiously Tarrant reached toward Avon. He cupped his hand around the back of the other man's head, lightly caressing his hair, and leaned forward slowly until his lips barely brushed Avon's, then pulled away again immediately. His heart was pounding.

That should do it, Tarrant thought. He had made the contact explicitly sexual but had also made it clear, he hoped, that Avon had the option of refusing. At least the other man had not pulled away from him. Their lower bodies were still pressed together, so that each was fully aware of the other's excitement.

Avon stared back in silence, his expression still enigmatic. Then he removed the arm that had been draped around Tarrant's waist and brought his hand up toward Tarrant's face. For a split second Tarrant wondered if he was going to be hit. Instead, Avon caressed his cheek and then moved the same hand down the side of Tarrant's body, touching his shoulder, his waist, his flank. The touch was proprietary, yet at the same time tentative.

You are mine—but only if you want to be, was the message that Tarrant interpreted.

"Yes," he whispered aloud.

With that affirmation, Avon's touch became more demanding and more blatantly erotic. His hand slipped around to stroke Tarrant's buttocks. They moved against each other, very deliberately letting their two erections touch and rub. Tarrant's last trace of nervousness vanished, and Avon seemed to relax a little as well, as they became accustomed to each other. Avon pulled back enough to get a hand between their two bodies and held the throbbing

shafts firmly together. He looked up expectantly at Tarrant and licked his lips suggestively. Tarrant leaned forward and kissed Avon as he had before, but this time Avon kissed back, hard. Their tongues touched just as their sexual organs did. It was unbearably exciting. Tarrant found himself thrusting forward against Avon's hand and cock, striving for satisfaction.

Avon broke off the kiss and pushed Tarrant onto his back. For a moment he lay on top of him, rubbing against him in a way that made Tarrant squirm and moan. Then he rolled off of Tarrant, stretched out beside him, and grasped Tarrant's cock firmly in his own right hand.

"Show me what you like," he said.

It took very little in the way of demonstration; Avon was a fast learner. Tarrant wrapped his hand around Avon's and moved it in the rhythm that he liked the best; but Avon caught on so quickly that before he knew it, Tarrant was clutching the sheets instead and crying out Avon's name as he came. The hands that had so often brought him relief from pain now brought the most intense pleasure imaginable.

As Tarrant returned from that height of ecstasy to more normal sensory perceptions, he felt acutely aware of Avon's presence beside him. He opened his eyes and gazed into the face of the man who was now his lover. Avon smiled at him—not quite a happy smile, but certainly a friendly one. Tarrant was suddenly determined to return the favor that Avon had done for him, and if possible to surpass it.

Now it was Avon's turn to be pushed, unprotesting, onto his back. Tarrant kissed him and stroked him, passing hands and mouth over the many scars, as if his loving touch could somehow undo all the history of pain recorded on that body. Avon responded with little sounds of pleasure and seemingly involuntary movements, pushing his hips up suggestively when Tarrant bypassed his straining cock to nibble at some other tempting area of flesh. It was fun to tease him, but Tarrant took care not to let it go on too long; he had no wish to be cruel. Soon enough he was licking at the shaft, and then, with his lips carefully folded over his teeth, taking it into his mouth.

Tarrant had never done this himself before, but he had had it done for him often enough that he thought he understood the principles. There was nothing repulsive about it; Avon was very clean, and

his reaction was all that could be desired. He was moaning and writhing, hot with passion, at his touch.

Tarrant did not know how to accommodate the entire length of an erect penis in his mouth without choking, so he used his hand as well. There were no complaints—indeed, Avon seemed to be beyond any words at all. The sounds he was making were not unlike groans of pain; but to Tarrant, who had seen and heard Avon in every possible extremity of agony, the difference was obvious. When the climax came, Tarrant raised his head and continued the stimulation with his hand alone—not because he did not want to taste Avon's come; he'd do that some other time—but because, this first time, he wanted to see the other man's face.

It was worth it. For just an instant, Avon was transfigured. The tragic mask so familiar to Tarrant was replaced with a radiant smile of happiness such as Tarrant had never seen before. The look faded almost immediately. Tarrant might have thought he had imagined it, but for the fact that he himself was suddenly feeling a rush of all too familiar emotion.

Tarrant always seemed to fall in love with remarkably inappropriate people. He realized he was doing it again.

* * *

The codes had been accepted, the transmission connection approved. There was a scratchy burst of static, then the communication channel connecting them to Gondar boomed to life.

"Identify yourself." The command was crisply enunciated in the manner of person used to issuing orders.

"My name is Blake, Roj Blake."

"Blake." There was a pause, then the speaker continued in a more cordial tone. "I'm Con Machalain. Not as famous as you or our celebrity guests, but I'm working on it."

"Guests. I'd heard about Avon. Are there others?"

"Only Del Tarrant. I understood that the rest of your group was dead. I'm sorry about that."

Not my group. Blake kept the thought to himself, not wanting to confuse the issue and waste time. "I'll be brief," he said instead. "I want you to understand that this is only speculation, but Avon was in Federation hands for a long time. It's possible that he's been tampered with."

"Tamper—But our medics have...."

"I don't know what type of equipment or personnel you have there, but certain types of conditioning can be difficult to detect."

"What should we do?"

"Nothing except keep a close eye on A-... on them. If you don't mind, I'd like to come there and evaluate the situation myself. I know you have no reason to trust me, but I'm sure Avalon will provide references."

"That's likely, or she wouldn't have told you about us to begin with. But, if you don't mind, I'll check with her first anyway."

Blake found Machalain's caution admirable. "You do that. We're about three days from your location. That should give you plenty of time to verify our credentials." His finger hovered above the cut off button. "One more thing. Don't mention any of this to Avon. In fact, it would be best if you don't mention me at all. We weren't on the best of terms the last time we met. I'll explain when I get there."

* * *

The door was unlocked and opened easily. The room beyond it was dimly lit. Lying on his back on the bed was Avon. He was thinner and more battered-looking than Blake remembered, but the profile was unmistakable. And he was not alone.

A slim, elegant, long-fingered hand rested affectionately against Avon's chest. Barely visible on the far side of the bed, beyond Avon's body, were a pale back and a tousled mass of auburn curls. The bedding was pulled decorously to waist level, but neither of the sleeping figures appeared to be clothed.

Quick work, Blake thought in some surprise. Here three weeks and he's already found himself a woman, the sly bastard!

The tableau lasted for a split-second only. Then the occupants of the bed were awake and turning toward the door, sitting up and staring at Blake with expressions compounded of shock, wariness, anger, and a touch of fear.

How could he have thought even for a moment that Avon's companion was a girl? Recognition of the sex was followed almost instantly by recognition of the individual, though the last time he had seen that face it had been far less handsome, marred by blood and bruises. It was the young man he'd found in the wreckage of **Scorpio**: Del Tarrant,

the pilot. Avon's man in more ways than one, it seemed.

"Sorry to interrupt you," Blake said with heavy irony, "but I believe we have some unfinished business."

"Blake?" Avon seemed dazed, as well he might be. Fortunately there were no weapons at hand.

"No, I don't suppose you're glad to see me. Did you think you had killed me? You came close enough."

"I—no." Avon seemed utterly at a loss for words, the only time Blake had ever known him to be so. He felt an obscure sense of triumph.

"It was my fault." Tarrant spoke up. "I told him what I thought had happened—what you let me think had happened."

"Oh, we'll have both your stories. Unlike you, we don't execute anyone without a hearing. Get dressed; I'm taking you both into custody. And I can tell you that your deceptive abuse of the hospitality of this group does not argue in your favor."

Blake turned the lighting up to high and lounged in the doorway, making it very clear that he was going to watch as they dressed. He was hoping that Avon at least would show some embarrassment, but both men did as they were told with surprising docility. There was not so much as a snarl from Avon, only a kind of stunned apathy that Blake found rather disappointing.

The harsh lights picked out white scars against white skin, and shadows cast by bones not far under it. Neither man was in good condition. Blake knew that they claimed to have been tortured by the Federation, but he had his doubts as to the veracity of their claims. An accident that damaged a ship and forced its survivors to subsist on short rations could easily have had the same effect, for example; and there were many other possibilities, up to and including deliberate deception. He'd have the truth out of them eventually.

There was something a little awkward about the way they put their clothes on, almost as if they were unaccustomed to the motions. Perhaps that was a sign of the embarrassment he'd expected, though overall they seemed more resigned than ashamed. When they finished, they exchanged an enigmatic glance with each other and then turned to face Blake.

He stepped out of the doorway and gestured to the men waiting behind him.

"Take them away."

The rebels were a bit rough with Avon, angry, perhaps, at the way he had deceived them. His hands were shackled behind his back and he was shoved down the hallway. Tarrant received the same treatment. They did not even try to look back at each other as they were herded to their separate cells.

* * *

At the knock on the door Blake placed his restless hands on the desk and locked his fingers together, striving for the most calm and casual appearance that circumstances would permit.

"Come in," he called.

Two guards escorted Avon into the room. They removed the thick metal cuffs that secured Avon's arms behind his back, then left.

"Sit," Blake suggested, giving a slight nod in the direction of the empty chair.

Avon slid silently into the waiting seat. He was as thin and pale as Blake had ever seen him. Not robust on Blake's arrival, he had visibly diminished during his two days in the holding cell. Avon continued to sit quietly in the chair, his arms folded, his legs crossed, and his face expressionless. Every nuance of his body language was closely guarded. *And no wonder*, Blake thought, *after what he has been through*. He began to feel just a little sorry for the other man.

"Avon, I owe you an apology," he began. "There was some question about your loyalties. You were in Federation hands for a long time, and we know... Well, I know what they can do." He searched the cold face for some flicker of emotion, but there was none. "Just recently, however, I received information that clears you of suspicion. I was able to get a copy of your medical report from Destri Minor." This time there was a reaction, but it was masked so quickly that he could not interpret it. "They said that you had been tortured severely for a long time. That you were in a coma, and could not possibly have participated in whatever it was that Tarrant was up to."

"What Tarrant was up to was saving my life," said Avon. "It was not perhaps the most intelligent thing to do under the circumstances, but intellect has never been his strong point."

"You're wrong there," said Blake. "He was clever enough to fool you, and for quite some time. The man is a Federation agent."

A barely perceptible twinkle in Avon's eyes indicated that he found the concept amusing. "Really?"

"Really. Don't you see, Avon? What happened on Gauda Prime was engineered by him. It wasn't your fault; I understand that now."

"You understand nothing. I made a serious error of judgement that had nothing to do with Tarrant. I will not have him blamed for my mistake."

"What do you know about him? Do you know who his family is? It was a Federation spy named Tarrant who destroyed the Freedom Party for the second time. They trusted and accepted him, just as you trusted and accepted this Tarrant. But he's been working against you all along. Didn't you wonder why you encountered so many disasters? He has manipulated you with consummate skill."

"I find that very difficult to believe. Tarrant has been, after his own admittedly naive fashion, a loyal shipmate and a highly valued associate."

"Valued for what? His handsome face and his firm young body? He seduced you, Avon. I never imagined that you, of all people, would be so foolish as to let sex impair your famous sense of self-preservation. How long has it been going on?"

"That's none of your business. But for what it's worth, not long, and he did not seduce me."

"Are you sure? That medical report was very complete. They indicated that some of the abuse had been, well, sexual in nature. Perhaps that experience has distorted your reactions."

"Are you implying that being raped by Servalan's men might somehow incline me to sport with Tarrant afterwards? That is remarkably weak reasoning even for you, Blake. Oh, I won't deny that our relationship probably has something to do with what we endured together. But there is no straightforward cause and effect; it is far less simple than you imagine."

Blake waved his hand, dismissing that topic for now. "Would you at least consider the possibility that Tarrant is a deep cover agent? And that he set up the trap on Gauda Prime."

"For what purpose?"

"To capture us, all of us. He also manipulated you into shooting me." Blake shrugged sheepishly. "I admit to giving him the ammunition for that."

Avon's eyes narrowed with skepticism. "Even assuming that your fairy tale has the slightest

possibility of being true, subsequent events clearly disprove it. For instance, after we were in Federation hands, why was Tarrant a prisoner?"

"Actually, that's where the flaw in their deception emerged. Think about it. The rest of your crew were executed. But why leave the two of you alive? You, I could understand. You have valuable skills and abilities that the Federation could put to use. But Tarrant didn't make sense. Pilots aren't that scarce. But double agents are."

"You are forgetting about the special handling that we both received. I witnessed Tarrant's injuries. They were real."

"Part of the deception."

"Brutal torture, a deception?"

"The stakes were high. I had gotten away. Tarrant's work wasn't finished. That's why the two of you were *allowed* to escape. The Federation expected that you would lead them to me."

"Then this is another trap?" Avon's silky tones were mocking. "If so, why are we still here waiting for the noose to tighten about our necks?"

"Because Tarrant has been neutralized. As soon as I arrived, you were both taken into custody."

"You haven't convinced me, Blake."

"Doesn't that story he told sound a bit false? As if the Federation would let its two most notorious prisoners walk out. You've stated how tight security was. Haven't you wondered how Tarrant managed the miraculous feat of escape?"

"The Federation was bound to make a mistake sooner or later." Avon's voice lacked its usual surety. "I was unconscious. I can't provide any of the details."

"That's right. You *were* unconscious. How amazing that Tarrant, weakened by weeks of abuse, managed to fight his way to a ship with a comatose man in his.... Where? In his arms? Thrown over his shoulder? Dragged along the ground?" Blake shook his head, miming incredulity. "I don't think that was how it went at all. I imagine it was quite the ceremonious occasion. You were dumped on the ship. Some senior officer shook hands with Tarrant, wished him luck, and waved him on his way. There was no escape; it was a well-orchestrated exit."

"Or, possibly, you have a well-honed imagination."

Blake leaned forward on the desk, barely restraining an urge to shout. "Tarrant was with Servalan. Servalan was on the ship with the two of you. That is not a figment of anyone's imagination."

The news sucked the blood from Avon's face. "What are you talking about?" he whispered.

Resisting the urge to gloat, Blake kept his demeanor carefully compassionate. "I didn't think you knew. Your lover has been keeping some deep, dark secrets from all of us. But he slipped up when he mentioned getting you medical help on Destri Minor. We interviewed the team that treated you there. They identified three people in your party: Tarrant, you and Servalan. There was no sign of discord between them. One witness said they appeared to be in co-command."

"There must be some mistake. Perhaps Tarrant had to take her hostage to escape. Or we were her prisoners and he overpowered her."

"They why would he lie about it? He never mentioned her, not once. Not until we confronted him."

"You've spoken to him? What did he say?"

"He couldn't very well deny the truth at that point. He admits that Servalan was there. He said her identity was compromised and she needed him to pilot her to safety. He agreed to do it in exchange for freedom for both of you. That was how you got away."

"Then that explains it."

"Explains his secrecy?" Blake taunted. "Explains why he won't tell us where she departed the ship? Explains why he erased the flight pattern from the navigation computer? The two of them are working together and are part of a larger conspiracy, one that is aimed at us in particular and the rebellion in general. If you were thinking with your brain instead of your hormones, you'd see that."

Fire sparked briefly across Avon's face. He inhaled deeply, quelling the blaze and replacing it with ice. "I believe you are the one allowing emotion to prevail. This is not about conspiracies. It is about Gauda Prime. You are angry and looking for a convenient scapegoat. There are several flaws in your logic. Not even Tarrant is so stupid that he would allow himself to be physically damaged for no good reason. They could have arranged our escape much sooner if that was their aim all along."

"Perhaps they had preparations to make first. And was he really so badly injured? You are the one who was half dead when you arrived here."

"His scars will speak for themselves."

"If they loaded him up with painkillers that you weren't aware of, he would hardly have felt a thing. Double agents are known to go to extreme

lengths to be convincing: plastic surgery, self-inflicted wounds. A few scars in the line of duty would be a badge of valor for one of them." Blake shuffled through a folder on the desk. He pulled out a paper and waved it in Avon's face. "This is the result of Tarrant's psych evaluation correlated with his activities as a Federation spy. It says that he is clever, courageous, devoid of morals, and totally dedicated to the Federation. It classifies him as a dangerous fanatic who will use any means to attain his goals."

"What would you expect, Blake? You told the computer that Tarrant was a Federation spy. It shouldn't come as any surprise that it threw that information right back at you. Don't you think my opinion is more valid than a foregone conclusion inserted into a computer?"

Blake shook his head. "You have no idea how ingenious double agents are, if you think you could detect one. He was impeccably trained. He wouldn't have so much as twitched a muscle at the wrong time. If I hadn't witnessed evidence of Dev Tarrant's treachery, I would still be spouting his praises. You respected Tarrant and thought you knew him. There's also hurt pride that you didn't recognize his duplicity. Don't let that pride blind you now." Blake could feel his emotions building. It had been such a relief to discover Avon's innocence. Now he wanted to put all of their mutual doubts behind them. "I've always trusted you, Avon. Won't you trust me on this?"

"You haven't convinced me, but you do make a persuasive argument," Avon said slowly. "I need time to think on it. I'll want to read that report of yours. There could be a plausible explanation for his secrecy regarding Servalan. He may be reluctant to tell you more because he doesn't trust you. Let me talk to him."

"And if he refuses to divulge the rest of his secrets to you?"

Avon's eyes lowered. "Then he will be damning himself."

* * *

Tarrant was hunched-over, staring at the floor, when he heard the cell door rattle open. Glancing up, his first reaction of surprise quickly turned to joy. "Avon," he said, rising to his feet. He took a step forward then halted, puzzled and concerned by the grim expression on the other man's face.

"What's the matter? Are you all right? You look terrible. But you're here, and that's good. I've been worried about you." His babbling sounded irritating even to his own ears—and Avon would hate it—but Tarrant intuitively knew that he didn't want to hear what Avon had to say. And speaking was the best way to still the other man's tongue. Except that he was only postponing the inevitable. He shut up.

"Sit down."

Tarrant obeyed, positioning himself near the head of the bunk and gesturing an invitation for Avon to sit beside him. The tech remained standing, and the chill that ran along Tarrant's spine grew more intense. He swallowed, rubbing his left hand along the stubble on his chin at the same time.

"Do you want to give me the bad news, or the really bad news, first?" he asked, trying to smile through his gloom.

"How did you get me onto that spaceship?"

"Hasn't Blake already answered that question? I knew he'd tell you, but I assumed you'd understand. Servalan and I carried you on board. I didn't mention her because even a temporary alliance with Servalan would have drawn suspicion our way. I intended to tell you, but the only private time we had...my mind was on other things. I explained to Blake what happened."

"Blake has made some serious accusations," Avon said, "that go beyond recent events. It involves Gauda Prime."

"Gauda Prime? Surely any sane person would realize that Blake is responsible for that fiasco. From what I gather, he's the one who let that Federation officer onto his base. And he gave me more than sufficient reason to mistrust him."

Avon slowly turned so that he was facing a blank wall instead of Tarrant. His voice was as rigid as his profile. "The consensus is that the woman—her name was Arlen—was not the only Federation agent on the base at the time."

"So?" Tarrant barely resisted standing and going to Avon, then spinning him about so that he'd be forced to meet his eyes. "What has that to do with us?" When Avon didn't immediately answer, he went on, "Is he claiming that we were working with Arlen? That theory has more holes than a Myronian puzzle board. As if we would deliberately crash our ship and put ourselves in the middle of a gun battle."

"The theory," Avon said quite deliberately, "might make sense if the perpetrator was a cleverly trained fanatic."

"And who is this *cleverly trained, fanatical Federation agent* supposed to be?"

"You."

Tarrant felt like he'd been given a jolt with a neuron whip. That Blake should accuse him of treachery wasn't a surprise; Blake had tried to twist everything Tarrant had told him about Servalan. The shock was that Avon would give any credence to Blake's allegations. Yet he'd known since his first glimpse of Avon's face that something terrible was wrong, something that went beyond their discord with the rebels to threaten their personal bond.

"Of course." Tarrant vented his hurt with an explosion of bitter sarcasm.

"I'm willing to be convinced otherwise."

"I'm supposed to be grateful for that? Servalan warned me what to expect. It seems she knows you and the rebel mindset better than I do. I didn't think I'd have to defend myself, not to you. I'm not Anna Grant."

Avon spun about on that. Normally devoid of emotion, the right edge of his mouth quivered, indicating a degree of agitation. "You would be better put to answering the charges. Or are your rantings intended to distract me? Perhaps you can't refute Blake's hypothesis because it is true."

"It's hardly worth refuting. Blake is a victim of paranoid delusions. What I can't understand is why you would even begin to believe his wild accusations."

"Attacking Blake isn't much of a defense either. If I had doubts about your guilt, you are quickly erasing them. Stop dithering and provide proof that Blake is wrong."

Tarrant crossed his arms and pulled his upper lip between his teeth, afraid to speak for fear of crying. Why didn't Avon understand that he wasn't avoiding the issue out of guilt? He was avoiding it because he didn't want to have to exonerate himself. He wanted Avon to know, instinctively, that Tarrant couldn't possibly betray him. None of the Federation tortures had even begun to wound him as deeply as Avon's doubt. He hadn't felt this miserable since he'd stared down at Dayna, Soolin, and Vila's bloody bodies.

"Talk to me." Avon grabbed his upper arms and shook him. "I don't want to believe Blake."

"That's not enough," Tarrant whispered. "Avon, I don't care to discuss this with you."

"Oh, I see," said Avon, stepping back to study him. "You are playing the spoiled child. You expect me to take you on blind faith or you will withdraw into a petulant silence. Grow up. This is a harsh, adult world. I cannot trust you simply because we shared sex."

Tarrant closed his eyes, secured the ache in his heart behind a sturdy barricade, and spoke. "I thought I could trust you because we shared pain. I was wrong. Just what am I accused of?"

He listened carefully as Avon defined his supposed crimes. "I don't understand," he said after the other man finished. "Blake's accusations are ludicrous. Considering the **Scorpio** crash and the Federation torture, I must be a suicidal masochist as well as a space command spy, wouldn't you think?"

"Painkillers would explain how you endured the torture."

"Painkillers would explain....," Tarrant found his tongue tripping over the words. "You were there. Tell me...tell me...." His voice faded and he shook his head. He didn't understand, couldn't comprehend, how Avon could even speculate that he hadn't suffered, but there wasn't the slightest hint of compassion in the other man's countenance. The framework of sharing and trust that had supported Tarrant through months of torment crumbled. Left bereft, he waited for Avon to continue.

"As for **Scorpio**, you didn't expect the landing to be as difficult as it was," Avon argued. "You needed us off the ship so that you could contact your allies. You never realized that the damage was so severe that your life was actually in danger. Or perhaps you did," he added, eyes gleaming. "Your profile suggests that you wouldn't mind dying for the greater glory of the Federation. What was it that you told that Major Grenlee? That soldiers are paid to die. It's all part of duty, honor, and military gallantry."

Tarrant was beyond believing anything he might say would make a difference, but he answered, because months of tortured interrogation had conditioned him to answer. Only now, Avon had assumed the role of inquisitor. "Duty and honor are very important," he said without emotion. "I didn't need to attend the FSA to know that. But you must know that my loyalty is no longer directed to the Terran government and Space Command. It's to you, as it was to our other shipmates."

"Pretty words, but there is a conspicuous lack of facts to support them."

With a constriction twisting his muscles into tight knots, Tarrant concluded, "It appears to be Blake's word against mine. I can't disprove that I'm a spy. If you believe his fabrications, there is no way I can change your mind."

"You could," Avon retorted, continuing to press. "I'm not gullible. I recognize every weakness and flaw in Blake's reasoning. I dismissed his allegations, much as you have, as absurd and silly. Except for one damning fact that I can't discard. Servalan. Tell me where she is. If your loyalty is to me and not to her, then tell me how to find her."

A giddiness rippled through Tarrant. Too much emotional stress. Not enough sleep. And a corner that had no exit. "I can't, precisely because I'm loyal to you. I gave her my word: her safe passage for our lives. I'm not sure that anything I could tell you would put her in danger, but I'm not sure it couldn't. I'm honor bound to remain silent."

"You don't have to keep your word to a viper. Would she keep hers to you?"

There was the out—Servalan's attempt to assure that Tarrant couldn't reveal where she was. She *hadn't* kept her end of the bargain. "I can't tell you," he repeated. "You wouldn't like me much, Avon, if I shared Servalan's code of questionable morals."

"No, I wouldn't."

To Tarrant's consternation, Avon reached out and gently squeezed his shoulder. Emotions that he'd held desperately in check resurfaced. He immediately resumed his original hunched over, face down position and closed his eyes against the swell of embarrassing moisture. Therefore, he didn't see Avon leave the cell; he only heard the soft pad of footsteps and the grating of the door. When it crashed shut, it was as if his spirit was caught and crushed between it and the jamb.

* * *

Avon's door was unlocked...again. Blake wondered briefly about that. Had his extended captivity given the tech an aversion to locked rooms? Or had his door always been unlatched, all those long days and nights on **Liberator**?

There was only one light on, a single beam that seemed to be shining directly on the slumped figure in the chair. Avon had to know he had

entered the room, but he didn't so much as twitch as Blake approached. His face was a raw wound that answered questions before they were asked. Avon's pain encompassed Blake, causing him to shiver as if a deep shadow had suddenly blocked warmth from the air.

"You've seen Tarrant, and he didn't elaborate on his story," Blake said. "I'm sorry." The words were inadequate to the situation. Without giving himself a chance to reconsider, he took two quick steps, positioning himself at Avon's back. His large hands gently settled onto the anguished man's shoulders. The muscles were cold and stiff to his touch. His fingers instinctively began to move, attempting to soothe away the tension and misery.

Avon stiffened slightly, seemed about to protest, then resumed his slouched pose of defeat.

Blake was startled by his own boldness. He would never have dared such a deliberate intimacy when they had crewed together. Not that he hadn't enjoyed the occasional light touches, and the few times when their bodies had been crushed together by accident or necessity. Avon was a sensual man, attractive to males and females alike. Blake had caught unguarded moments when each of their shipmates had regarded the tech with smoldering ardor. But the man's emotional armor had kept them all at arm's length.

Now he was vulnerable and approachable.

Blake's fingers continued their massage, plying elasticity into surface knots then probing deeper. The tautness had turned slack by the time Avon finally spoke. "I still find it difficult to believe that Tarrant is guilty of the crimes you suggest."

"That's natural." Blake forged on; it was awkward, discussing something so personal, but he was determined to be frank. "I'm sure you wouldn't have bedded the man if you didn't feel real affection for him."

A warmth was sparking through Blake. He couldn't let it ignite. The timing was inappropriate. He gave one last squeeze then released his hold, curving around immediately to where he was facing Avon.

"There are matters that we must consider," he said briskly. "We need information from Tarrant."

Avon pulled himself together, rising from the chair and nodding for Blake to continue.

"I'd rather Deva explain."

Deva was waiting for the call. Within minutes, he appeared at the door. Blake, realizing the two men had never actually met, performed introductions. They eyed each other warily during the exchange: Deva because of what he did know, Avon because of what he did not.

"I trust Deva," Blake said, elaborating on the brief introduction. "We've been together a long time, since shortly after Star One." It was, perhaps, not the best of testimonials—Avon had known Tarrant as long—but it was too late to take the words back.

Under other circumstances, Avon would have jumped on Blake's faux pas with wry sarcasm. If his eyes didn't reflect any amusement now, at least they didn't shine with distress either. Sometime, perhaps during the massage, he'd regained some of his old equilibrium.

The blunder went unnoticed by Deva. He was rigidly formal as he began his prepared speech. "There are two important factors," he pointed out. "One is Tarrant's guilt or innocence. The other is Servalan's location, and her current and future plans. Whether Tarrant is rebel or Federation, he at least knows where he last saw her."

"We don't want to punish Tarrant if he is as guiltless as he claims."

Deva frowned at Blake's interruption then continued, "We have a way to acquire the information we need."

"I'm all too familiar with methods of extracting information," Avon said. He glared at Blake. "I thought you stood for a better world than what the Federation offered."

"It does not involve torture," Deva said evenly. Avon's attention returned to him. The red-haired man reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a stoppered vial. "This drug was recently developed by a rebel scientist, Dr. Parquell. It is an infallible truth serum."

Avon braced his arms behind his back, striking a pose common to lecturing academicians. "I'm familiar with some of Parquell's work. He was once in charge of brain chemistry research at the Federation Science Center. He evolved some of the newer techniques used to transform people into mutants."

"He defected three years ago," Blake defended the scientist, "sickened by what the Federation forced him to do."

"I've heard that his only passion in life is pure research." Avon regarded Deva and Blake with

tense deliberation. "Is Tarrant to be a guinea pig for one of Parquell's experiments?"

"The drug has been tested," Deva said in a manner that suggested he was offended by Avon's implication. "The risks are slight."

"Don't play games with me," Avon snapped. "Any drug that can affect the brain sufficiently to function as an 'infallible truth serum' will have side effects. Just how slight are these risks?"

"A small percentage of subjects suffer minor neuromuscular impairment."

"You mean it slows the reflexes," Avon said acidly. "And you're going to give this to a *pilot*?"

"Well, he's not going to be flying any of our ships if we can't trust him," Blake pointed out.

"It is more humane than the torture you endured," Deva added. He rested his hand on Blake's arm. "More humane than the conditioning that Blake endured. Would you have us condemn Tarrant without trying to determine the truth? We don't have the luxury of presuming his innocence."

"I suppose you don't," Avon admitted. "Let me talk to him again. Given the choice between your drug and speaking freely, Tarrant may elect to be prudent for a change."

"Do it now," Blake said, wearily rubbing his eyes. "We'll give him overnight to decide. I want this finished."

Deva's hand wrapped about Blake's upper arm, making sure that he didn't follow Avon from the room. When they were alone, he demanded, "Can you really trust anything that Tarrant might say under duress?"

"No. If he doesn't give us facts that we can corroborate, we'll have to question him under the drug. Avon's not ready to accept that. The delay is for his benefit, not Tarrant's."

"You place a lot of importance on Avon. Is it his value to the cause or is it personal?"

Only the ever-blunt Deva would have confronted him with that inquiry. Aware of his friend's undeclared *personal* interest in him, Blake felt he deserved an answer. The trouble was he didn't have one. "If I ever figure that out," he said softly, "I'll let you know."

Deva's eyes didn't waver as he slowly nodded, accepting Blake's undefined entanglement with Avon. He'd wait patiently until Blake had resolved it, and even longer than that if necessary.

"I better go," Deva said, changing the subject. "I want to monitor Avon's conversation with Tarrant personally."

* * *

Until morning...Blake had agreed to give Tarrant until morning. Avon checked his watch to confirm that he had approximately nine hours of grace before Blake would act.

The guard readily gave him access to Tarrant's cell. It appeared that Blake's trust in him was as complete as his mistrust of Tarrant.

Sprawled on the bunk, Tarrant sat up as Avon approached. His blue eyes were accusatory, hurt, and sad. "What do you want?" he asked bitterly.

"To provide you with information on your fate if you do not cooperate."

Tarrant eyed him stonily. "Your thoughtfulness has been duly noted. Now leave. The only thing I want to hear from you is the sound of your footsteps walking out of this cell."

"As usual your mouth is jumping ahead of common sense. No one wants to punish an innocent man, but you are leaving us little choice. We cannot risk harboring a traitor in our midst. We will learn the truth."

"How?" The question was an impertinent challenge, but the way Tarrant's hands gripped the edge of the bunk indicated that he wasn't as indifferent as he pretended.

"A rebel scientist has developed a truth drug. You will be given it, then questioned."

The air in the room went still. Tarrant's facade of insolence and disinterest crumpled, to be replaced by a preternatural apprehension that turned his skin chalk white. "Would you mind repeating that?" he asked quietly.

"It was simple enough," Avon answered. "You will be drugged and interrogated."

"You'd let them do that to me?" Emotional shock gave way to outrage as Tarrant cried out, "Will you allow Blake to jab a hook into me as well?"

It was Avon's turn to have his emotions crushed in a vice. Nausea and giddiness temporarily blurred all other sensations. It was all he could do to resolutely hold himself rock still. Not sure his voice would even work, he murmured, "I didn't think you remembered...."

"Oh, I remember," Tarrant said, on the brink of hysteria. "You're the one who seems to have forgotten. Do you think I was faking the pain from that hook? Do you?" He didn't give Avon a chance to answer as he rushed on, "But it wasn't the physical pain that made that session particularly horrifying. It was the drugs. They violated my mind, Avon. I...I..." his voice broke as he continued, "can't endure that again. No more, please, no more. No more interrogation. I'd rather die."

"Stop it. No one has hurt you. No one will if you answer a few simple questions."

"You know I can't." Tarrant looked at Avon imploringly. "Please, Avon, I'm completely innocent, but incapable of proving it. I-I can't undergo interrogation. I'd prefer death.... Please help me—or, if you can't help me—give me something, anything, and I'll take matters into my own hands."

"That's a coward's way out."

"I don't care." Shivers racked Tarrant's body. He clutched his arms about his chest, but that didn't stop the trembling. "I barely held together before, and only then because of you and for you. I can't go through it again. Let it end. Please."

Tarrant's breakdown was something Avon hadn't anticipated, though he admitted to himself that he should have. Their mental defenses were pitifully fragile after the long period of abuse. Full recovery—if that was even possible—was a distant future away.

"I'll try to do something," he promised, wishing the presence of surveillance didn't prohibit greater assurance. "Blake isn't going to hurt you. He's not that kind of man. Trust me."

"The same way you trust me?" Tarrant shot back. "Go away, Avon. I don't want you here." He rolled back on the bed, his body tucked into a cramped curve as if in the throes of physical agony. His eyes were squeezed tight against a world that terrified him. Avon hadn't seen him that distressed in all the weeks of endured torture.

He exited the cell. Tarrant's words—that didn't seem to be directed at anyone in particular—followed him out the door. "Just let it end."

* * *

Blake paced Avon's room, ignoring the exhaustion that threatened to topple him to the ground. He hadn't slept well since he'd learned that

Avon was within his reach. His dreams were confused mixtures of pain and desire, none of them restful.

A soft sound caused him to whirl around. Avon had returned. He was standing in the doorway, his body leaning into the frame in the manner of a man who had reached his limit.

"Sit down," Blake urged, rushing to him. Neither of them were steady on their feet as they wobbled over to sit side-by-side on the bed. "Why won't that stubborn idiot talk? Why is he doing this to you?"

"We are the ones *doing* to him. You have to remember that we...he has been treated rather cruelly. Anything he construes as abuse might cause psychological damage greater than any possible physical damage. Blake..."

The way Avon said his name was a hopeless plea for help. Blake started to rub soothing circles on the smaller man's back. "He's getting to you again. Don't assume guilt for his travails. We are being reasonable and fair. He's bringing this on himself."

"Is he?" Avon rested his head on Blake's shoulder, sighing. "I find that I'm very confused."

"I'll spend the night here with you. We'll get through it together. Tomorrow, first thing, we'll get to the truth and this will all be over." He thought he felt Avon stiffen in reaction to his proposal, and quickly reassured him, "I don't mean together like *that*."

"I didn't think you did," Avon replied. "It's just that I'm not very good company for anyone at the moment."

"That's why...." Before Blake could finish his statement, the entrance chime sounded, followed by Deva walking through the still-open door.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," the red-haired man said, "but I need to see you, Blake. Now, and in private."

There was an element of urgency in Deva's voice that Blake wouldn't normally have ignored, but he resisted leaving Avon alone with his misery. "Can't it wait until mid-morning. We'll have this mess behind us by then, and I'll be better able to concentrate on other concerns."

"It can't wait until mid-morning." Deva flipped his hair off his forehead with an agitated slap. "It can't wait one minute."

"Very well." Blake glanced at Avon's silky hair brushing against his cheek. "How long do you think this will take?"

"That depends, but I'd estimate at least an hour, probably longer."

Avon pulled out of Blake's embrace, showing a sudden burst of energy that Blake wouldn't have thought possible in the crumpled body that had been resting tenderly against his. "You need to take care of business," he said, "and I'm quite all right alone."

Reluctantly, Blake levered his hands against his knees and pushed to his feet. "If you need me, call. My com is extension 039."

"I'll do that."

"Blake." Deva gestured toward the door. There was a cold determination in his eyes that Blake had only seen on two or three other occasions. Whatever Deva had on his mind, it was gravely important.

Once they reached Blake's cabin, Deva jammed a data cube into the computer and called up a graph on the screen. "Tarrant wants to die," he announced soberly.

"So that's what he used to play on Avon's conscience. The dirty bas—"

"He was not playing. He was quite sincere. If you will look at this," Deva pointed to the peaks on the graph, "you'll see that the computer ranked his veracity level at 99%. Not even a psychopath can fool a judgment program to that degree. The man has been through so much that he would prefer death to more interrogation."

"He wants to die to avoid giving us useful information."

"Blake," Deva leaned forward and took his hands, "this has gone too far. Let the boy go. He has suffered enough."

Blake jerked his hands free. "He has suffered enough?"

"Yes. As have you...and Avon. There were misunderstandings and mistakes, but there was never any deliberate evil on the part of anyone."

"He is guilty. You've seen how he refuses to answer simple questions."

"I've also seen this." Deva pulled a second cube from his trousers pocket. "This is the evaluation by the psychotherapist who examined Avon and Tarrant when they were in the base infirmary." He removed the first cube and replaced it with the second. "I am ashamed that I did not read it before this evening."

"We didn't read it because it wasn't complete. She only observed them. No testing was done."

"If we had read this document, we would know why. She was so sure of her findings that she didn't feel a need to corroborate her diagnosis of severe stress fatigue. She resolved that psychological testing would do more harm than good given Avon and Tarrant's emotional distress. She intended to recommend therapy after an initial period of recovery. Her report is thirty plus pages long and quite detailed."

"You've read a thirty-page report since Avon's last visit to Tarrant?"

"Not exactly.... My first instinct was to release Tarrant immediately. If you could have seen how pitiful he looked....," Deva shook his head, shuddering. "But out of respect for you, I wanted to substantiate my evaluation of the situation before letting him go. So I searched for more information. I read the introduction and the summary of the psychotherapist's manuscript, and skimmed through the rest of it. It was enough to convince me that we should review the report in its entirety. I believe it will confirm Tarrant's innocence."

"How?"

"For one thing, he was tortured to extremes that were not necessary if it was all a ploy to fool Avon. The degree of abuse and injury detailed by the medical team is enough to turn one's stomach. It is a wonder that either of them survived."

"I don't...."

"Let me touch on a few quotes by the primary physician on the case." Deva scrolled through screens then stopped at an area marked in red.

"Nerve regeneration necessary on both hands. Cause of damage: third-degree burns." He moved down a page, stopping at a second highlighted passage.

"Scans show recent fractures of a half dozen different bones." Deva turned from the screen to face Blake. "I...we should have read this days ago."

Blake stuck a finger in his mouth and began gnawing on it.

"Malnourished. Anemic."

Deva skimmed through a few more pages before stopping. "I believe this alone is sufficient to prove his innocence." He read: "Internal scarring consistent with tears to the intestinal wall made by a sharp object or objects inserted through the anus."

Blake jerked to his feet, strode to the door, and pounded on it. "I thought I had it figured out. What have I done?"

"Nothing that can't be undone. We will review the data on both cubes, then we can see about repairing the damage."

* * *

Silent tears streamed down Tarrant's face until his cheeks chafed from the salty bath. He didn't know how long he lay there with his heart aching to the breaking point, but eventually a numbness crept up from his toes, and resigned helplessness calmed him. He recognized that he was again at the mercy of people who held him captive. Death seemed to be his only alternative to continued persecution.

It was ironic to be back to that point. Ironic but not unexpected. There had been a sense of surrealism during their escape and the recuperation period that followed. Tarrant had never adjusted to being safe, and maybe that was a good thing. The gossamer weavings of his love affair with Avon had been even more ephemeral. Like a delicate flower, it had fallen apart before its beauty could be fully appreciated, the petals dispersed by the winds of chance and change.

Knowing that he couldn't rely on any kind of personal attachment to convince Avon to grant him the mercy of death, Tarrant concentrated on a practical persuasion that might sway his pragmatic comrade. He thought long and hard; and if a sob occasionally welled up from deep in his chest, he ignored it. He couldn't succumb to another bout of anguish. Part of him was sure that if that sentiment gripped him again, he'd be in its clutches forever.

The fates were kind, if that word could in any way relate to his present situation. Not only had he reasoned out a legitimate petition for a swift execution, but the person who came for him was Avon. He wasn't sure his entreaty would be as effective if he had to present it to Blake.

Avon was brisk and blunt. He ducked under the still opening cell door and motioned to Tarrant. "Come with me."

There was only the slightest tremble in Tarrant's voice as he shook his head and said, "Hear me out first."

Avon's answer to that was to grab his sleeve and haul him to his feet. He tossed him out the door and into the arms of a waiting guard. The guard

appeared to be as surprised as Tarrant, but he recovered more quickly.

"Do you want him cuffed?"

"I..." Avon hesitated, his eyes boring into Tarrant. "Yes, you had better."

As his arms were roughly yanked behind his back, Tarrant fought the anxiety rising through him. He rushed out, "Avon, please listen. No drugs, no interrogation. Y-you mentioned that you didn't want to punish an innocent man. I'll sign a confession. You can execute me conscience-free."

Metal shackles were clicked into place. Avon took the key and pocketed it. Then he gripped a handful of Tarrant's tunic and pulled him along.

"Please listen," Tarrant pleaded as he was propelled through the corridor. "You don't have to do this. I'll admit to anything, just don't...don't..."

They turned a corner and Avon shoved him against a wall. He lodged his full weight against Tarrant and pressed his lips to the younger man's mouth. Startled out of his half panic, Tarrant instinctively responded to the kiss, his mouth opening so that their breath mingled, forming a hot, moist cloud. Their lips tore at each other, twisting, pressing, and writhing in mutual passion. Just as the heat from the kiss exploded in Tarrant's groin, Avon pulled back.

"I don't have time for lengthy explanations," he said, one hand twining through Tarrant's curls. "I had to pretend to agree with Blake. I had to remain free and above suspicion so that I could get us out of here if that should prove necessary. After my last visit to you, I readied a ship. We are leaving."

"Leaving," Tarrant echoed.

"Yes, immediately. I've already loaded supplies on board."

Tarrant was grateful for Avon's firm grip on his arm, guiding him through the weaving passageways. Tears were running down his face and obscuring his vision. Only this time, it was joy and relief rather than despair that had spawned the flood. Tarrant was embarrassed but helpless to check the torrent.

At some point, Avon stopped. He removed the cuffs and gently massaged Tarrant's wrists. Then even more gently he blotted Tarrant's face with a soft handkerchief. "You can't play the role of prisoner any more," he explained in a soothing voice. "We are taking a small planet hopper out to test a reported fault in its navigation computer. The problem is genuine. My assignment to repair it is

not. I counterfeited a work order yesterday. The person in charge of the hangar is expecting us. Do you think you can hold together?"

Tarrant nodded.

"Good."

They came to the office that served as the nerve center for the underground bay. Avon stuck his head inside, keeping Tarrant back in the shadows. "I've found my idiot of a pilot," he called, "...in bed. Could you open the overhead for us?"

"Sure," a burly man in a green jumpsuit answered, walking towards them. "How long did you say you'd be?"

"An hour. Two at the most."

"Keep in contact." The man was staring at Tarrant's reddened eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to postpone this? He looks like he's been drinking enough for twelve men."

"He has. I've given him a sobriety pill. As for his hangover, he deserves it."

Laughing, the man clapped Tarrant on the back. "It doesn't sound like you'll get any sympathy from this one, boy."

"No more than I deserve," Tarrant said quietly. "Let's get this over with," he added to Avon, wanting to get inside the ship as quickly as possible. His chest was heavy with turbulent emotion, and he wasn't sure that another outburst of uncontrollable tears wasn't pending.

Avon must have sensed the same because he kept the atmosphere calm and businesslike through the pre-flight and take off. "Set course 9-5-7," he instructed after they were free of the planet's gravitational pull.

Tarrant obeyed though he found the order puzzling. "You do know that will take us into Federation space?"

"Of course." Avon smiled slyly. "It's the last place they'll look for us."

Still keeping his eyes on the control panel, Tarrant said, "Avon, thank you."

There was a period of silence before Avon responded.

"I don't suppose anyone explained to you that the drug they were going to use might have caused neurological damage. I thought there'd been more than enough of that sort of thing already."

He glanced across at Tarrant, his expression enigmatic. When he spoke again, his voice was gruff.

"I expect you to take good care of yourself from now on, Tarrant. I have no wish to do any more nursing."

* * *

Blake studied the object in his hand as if it were some exotic oddity rather than a standard portable recording device. It had been resting on top of a light-colored towel spread across an otherwise empty table in Avon's quarters. The intent of the arrangement had been clear—to call attention to the recorder.

He and Deva had listened to the very brief message, then listened to it again.

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to this," Avon's voice said. He had sounded genuinely regretful.

"It's my fault," Deva declared. "I should have told him that I believed Tarrant to be innocent."

"If anyone is to assume blame for this, it's me," Blake positioned the recorder back on the towel and sank into the closest chair. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Avon must have been planning this all along. He only pretended to believe that Tarrant was guilty."

"Would we have listened if he had tried to persuade us otherwise?" Deva asked, gallantly continuing to shoulder part of the responsibility.

"No. He did try. I wouldn't listen. I didn't want to listen."

"I don't think he wanted to leave. I've pieced everything together as carefully as possible. While he had to have worked out the scheme ahead of time, he didn't implement it until he felt his back was against the wall."

"Pushed there by me."

"Blake, everyone makes mistakes. We have to learn to accept those mistakes, learn from them, and move on. Self-recrimination is not productive."

"Failure to accept my mistake on Gauda Prime brought me to this point," Blake said. "It wasn't Avon I was trying to absolve by placing blame on Tarrant. It was me...me."

Deva moved in behind him, draping his arms over Blake's shoulders and resting his face in the luxuriant mass of curls. "You work too hard; press yourself too much."

Lips pressed against Blake's skull. He leaned into the kiss while his hands started to rub along the smooth, pale arms of his friend. "And I don't appreciate what I have."

"We'll find them some day. This will still all work out," Deva promised.

Blake pulled the other man around to face him. The love in Deva's eyes was almost enough to make him weep. What had he done to deserve such devotion?

"It will work out," he said tenderly. To make sure Deva realized that he wasn't speaking of Avon anymore, he drew him close until their bodies were pressed tightly against each other. Then, with genuine passion, he kissed the man who had waited so patiently for this moment.

* * *

It felt good and right to be in Avon's arms again. Tarrant would have been content to savor the closeness and sleep off some of his emotionally-charged fatigue, but his lover appeared to have other ideas.

Avon tickled his fingers across Tarrant's backside. The touch was both almost too light to be felt and incredibly arousing at the same time. When the stroking was repeated, the tingling spread to Tarrant's groin.

"You have an amazingly sensitive spot—" there was another rippled pass over his flank, "right there."

"Yes, I know." Reluctantly, Tarrant captured Avon's hand and brought it into the hollow between them. "I can't think when you do that," he explained.

Avon smiled teasingly. "When could you ever...think?" He leaned forward to initiate a kiss. It was several breathless minutes before he released Tarrant's mouth.

"I can't think when you do that either," Tarrant protested.

"I thought we'd established that thinking was not your forte. If you had any wits at all, you'd realize that I didn't crawl into your bed to engage in an intellectual pursuit. Thinking is not necessary to participate in what I had in mind."

Tarrant dodged a combination attack from hands and mouth and said, "Avon, what about Blake?"

"Blake." Avon immediately sobered. He started to shift as if to rise from the bed. Tarrant pulled him back.

"This won't take long," he promised. "Stay. Please." When Avon was settled on his side facing him again, Tarrant continued, "Blake loves you."

A darkness flickered in Avon's eyes. "Tarrant, you had better have a good reason for this."

"I think I do. When I used the word *love*, I wasn't trying to imply that it was carnal love, though it might be. I don't know Blake well enough to determine that. But I do know that you are very important him. And when you believed that he had betrayed you, it must have hurt him deeply. It's why he is so very angry now. And it's why we have to make peace with him, somewhere down the road. We don't have so many potential friends that we can afford to discard a one of them."

"Blake does not consider himself to be our friend."

"Doesn't he?" Tarrant tried to put his confused thoughts into some form that Avon might understand. "I didn't speak to him much, but I could tell that he holds you in high regard, personally as well as professionally. He was visibly relieved when he decided that you weren't his enemy."

"Only because he found you to blame."

"That's it exactly. It was such a ludicrous twist of logic. For Blake to believe it, he had to very much want to believe it. He wanted you to be innocent."

"Which does not absolve him from what he did to you. I've often seen Blake high-minded and stubborn, but not often as unreasonable as he was when it came to using you as a scapegoat."

"We can't make it on our own," Tarrant said, doggedly bringing the conversation back on topic.

"I won't argue that." He paused, then added, "And I will consider what you said." There was a pain in his eyes as Avon reached out and traced Tarrant's lips with his fingers. "I never once believed the accusations made against you."

Tarrant felt a blush warming his cheeks. It was as if his bedmate could read his mind and knew that Tarrant was reflecting on the hurt he had felt when he thought Avon didn't trust *him*. "Avon...."

"No more thinking." Moving decisively, Avon gathered Tarrant into a crushing embrace. "I'd like to get back to my original plans," he whispered.

Grinning happily, Tarrant danced his fingers along his lover's spine. "If you must," he said with mock resignation, then lightened his voice to finish, "I'll just have to save my comments on the theory of anti-gravity wells for another time."

Avon actually laughed out loud before he stopped all verbal conversation with another deep kiss. Apparently satisfied that Tarrant would not

argue any longer, he released his mouth and worked his way down the neck, paying special attention to the particular spots that made Tarrant squirm and gasp. Tarrant was hard well before Avon touched him directly. When the clever hands and mouth finally reached his genitals, he had to clutch at the sheets and remind himself that waiting would make it even better in the end.

Avon was tickling his fingers over that spot on his backside again. Together with the more direct stimulation of Avon's mouth on his cock, it was almost too much. Avon was getting better and better at holding him just on the verge of orgasm. This time, though, Avon seemed to have something else in mind. The caressing hand slipped into the cleft between Tarrant's buttocks, and a finger brushed against the hidden opening.

"Tarrant? Would you..." Avon's tone of voice was seldom so tentative, nor did he usually fail to finish questions. But Tarrant knew exactly what he was talking about. He had thought the same thing himself but hadn't had the nerve to mention it. He grinned at Avon.

"I'll let you do me if you'll let me do you."

There was a split-second pause, then:

"It's a deal," said Avon. The hand stayed in place for another moment, and the finger pressed against the part of Tarrant's anatomy that he had just offered to Avon. Then it was withdrawn and there was another pause.

Tarrant pulled himself together enough to answer a second unasked question. "There's hand lotion in the bathroom that might work."

Avon did not respond immediately. He applied his right hand to Tarrant's cock while he reached out with the left and took hold of Tarrant's right hand. He let Tarrant's fingers curl naturally around his own and kissed the back of the hand, as if Tarrant were a courtly lady in some ancient drama. Then he turned the back of the hand over, traced circles in the palm with his tongue, and sucked delicately at each finger. Tarrant knew that he, like any top-notch pilot, had sensitive hands, but he had never realized they were so susceptible to erotic stimulation. The sexual energy seemed to flow in a charged circuit from his hand through his body to his throbbing cock and taut balls, and from there into Avon's hand, through Avon, and back to him again.

With both hands still on Tarrant, Avon leaned forward and licked each nipple briefly, sending what felt like exquisite showers of sparks

through Tarrant's nervous system. Then Avon closed the circuit. He brought Tarrant's tingling hand down and wrapped it around Tarrant's cock, so that it took the place of his own.

"I'll be back," he said.

Tarrant did not try to stimulate himself actively, but the sensations coursing through his body were already so intense that it hardly mattered. He had barely adjusted to Avon's absence when his lover was back again.

"That's good," said Avon. "Stay like that and bend your knees." Tarrant pulled his legs up so that he was even more fully exposed to Avon's eyes and hands. He felt a quick flicker of embarrassment, but after all, Avon had seen and touched every part of his body many times before. He stroked himself a little by way of reassurance.

"Yes, good," Avon murmured. He spread the lotion around Tarrant's anus with little circular motions. When he slipped a finger inside it felt quite natural, merely an extension of the external massage. He stared intently at Tarrant's face as he moved the finger in and out, adding more of the lotion as he did. There was a change in the sensation, and Tarrant realized that Avon had added another finger. Avon slipped the two fingers deep inside, so that Tarrant could feel the rest of his hand pressing against the outside opening, and applied gentle pressure at the tips. Tarrant felt a spasm of intense pleasure. His eyes flew wide open and he stared at Avon in extreme surprise.

"There?" said Avon, pressing again. Tarrant's reaction must have been obvious. "Oh yes, there," Avon said with satisfaction, and did it again. He moved his fingers in and out, rubbing against the magical spot.

It had never occurred to Tarrant that the penetration of his body might give him direct physical pleasure. He had assumed that it would be like going down on Avon: enjoyable for the thrill of giving pleasure to his lover and the knowledge that it would eventually be reciprocated. But this experience was in a class by itself.

"Ready?" Avon asked. Again, he answered his own question: "Yes, I think so." Tarrant managed to nod in agreement. Avon withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his cock. It was larger, but the smooth shape made the insertion easy. There was a momentary sensation of discomfort—after all he had been through Tarrant

would no longer identify anything so mild as pain—and then Avon was sliding easily into him.

"Yes!" said Tarrant, not caring if he sounded foolish. "Oh, Avon!" The rhythmic movement of Avon's cock inside him was giving even more pleasure than the fingers had. He was about to come already.

"Not just yet," said Avon. He stopped thrusting, though he was still deep inside Tarrant, and sat back. Tarrant was still clutching his own cock. Avon pushed Tarrant's hand down toward the base, wrapped his own hand tightly around it, and squeezed hard. The urgency subsided. After a moment Avon took both of Tarrant's hands and moved them up to the level of his shoulders. Tarrant wrapped his legs around Avon's waist and pulled him close. Avon leaned forward to kiss him, entwining the fingers of both their hands, and began to move his hips again. He was not so much holding Tarrant down as taking the lead in a dance.

Avon broke off the kiss and speeded up his movements. Tarrant pushed up against him as best he could. The pounding inside him was so strong that it might have hurt if he had been less excited, but now he welcomed it. Once again he felt himself approach orgasm. He opened his eyes and stared into Avon's face. Avon's eyes were closed, his mouth slightly open. He was as far beyond speech as Tarrant now. Avon shuddered and released Tarrant's hands. He braced himself on his arms and thrust hard. Tarrant flung his arms around Avon's neck and held on as Avon shook in his embrace and cried out. Before it was quite over Tarrant came himself, releasing all the pent-up energy of their coupling into the warm space between their two bodies. He thought he called Avon's name but wasn't sure whether his open mouth had formed actual words.

Avon's dead weight was heavy against him for a moment. Then he was moving, disentangling their various limbs and stretching out on his back beside Tarrant. Tarrant rolled over and rested against Avon's broad chest, with his arms draped loosely around Avon. The soft body hair tickled his cheek. When they were horizontal, Tarrant's advantage in height disappeared and Avon's more solid build almost made him seem the bigger of the two. Avon stroked Tarrant's hair absentmindedly. Then his hand fell away and he lay still, as did Tarrant. There was a companionable silence.

Just when Tarrant was beginning to suspect that the other man had gone to sleep, Avon spoke.

"We had a deal," he reminded Tarrant.

"Do you really want me to do it?" Tarrant asked.

"Well, you certainly seemed to enjoy it."

Tarrant felt himself blushing with reminiscent pleasure. "Perhaps a little cleanup first?" he suggested. Without waiting for an answer, he gave Avon a quick squeeze and rolled off him. In the bathroom, he hastily sponged off sweat and semen. The very thought of what he was about to do was beginning to affect him.

Avon was waiting outside the door. He put his hands on Tarrant's shoulders, kissed him hard and fast, and neatly turned then both around so that they changed places. Tarrant returned to the bed, lay down, and waited with mounting excitement. When Avon emerged, only moments later, Tarrant was already fully erect. Avon looked down at him and smiled.

"I trust you'll be making good use of that."

Tarrant smiled back at him. "I think I can manage." He reached up with one hand. Avon took it and let himself be pulled down on top of Tarrant. Clutching each other and kissing frantically, they rolled over so that Tarrant lay on top. He rubbed against Avon, slipping his erection between Avon's powerful thighs. Was there an answering twitch of Avon's cock against his stomach? He wasn't sure, but Avon was already making those delightful little moans of pleasure.

Tarrant pulled himself up a little and looked down at his lover. Avon's hair was appealingly mussed, and his eyes seemed huge. In the dim light the lines in his face were barely visible. He looked very young, and very handsome. Tarrant felt a wave of desire that began in the pit of his stomach and spread through his entire body. The charge extended out to his fingers and toes and circled in again to center on his groin.

He worked his way down Avon's body, kissing and stroking as he loved to do, and savoring Avon's reactions. Avon was no stoic when it came to expressing pleasure, and his responses excited Tarrant in turn. Tarrant caressed Avon's legs and pushed them up so that Avon lay just as he himself had a little earlier. It was a somewhat awkward position for what they were planning to do, but Tarrant thought that entry from behind might be too

reminiscent of what had been done to them by the torturers. Besides, he wanted to watch Avon's face.

Tarrant knelt between Avon's legs and began to suck and fondle him in the ways he knew Avon most liked. This time, though, he was bolder in his exploration of Avon's body than he had ever been before. He let his hands wander ahead and followed them with his mouth. While he sucked Avon's cock, his hands were toying with Avon's balls. When he had Avon completely erect, he let his hands slip down and back. He licked Avon's balls and tickled the sensitive spot behind them, eliciting a drawn-out moan. Then, feeling very daring, he flicked his tongue over the little puckered opening. Avon made an inarticulate sound of surprise and pleasure and spread his legs wider, offering himself to Tarrant.

Tarrant experienced a brief attack of anxiety. Was Avon's obvious trust in him justified? If he fucked Avon, could he avoid hurting him? The hole looked very small indeed, and Tarrant had vivid memories of the horrible wounds he had tended. Was everything completely healed? He calmed himself with the reminder that he had suffered similar injuries himself, and what Avon had just done to him had felt wonderful.

Avon was impatient with Tarrant's hesitation. "Go on," he urged.

Tarrant took the hand lotion and smeared it on his hand and on Avon. He fingered Avon's anus carefully, as if he were handling a delicate piece of equipment. There was a slight tension as he pushed one finger cautiously inside; then Avon relaxed to admit him. The hidden flesh was velvety soft and clung hotly to his finger. Fragile, yes, but delightful to touch, both for him and for Avon. He could hardly wait to feel that sheath surrounding his cock, but first he wanted to be sure that Avon was as excited as possible. He bent to suck at Avon's cock again. With his other hand he caressed Avon's quivering balls, all the while continuing his gentle stretching of the opening that would soon receive him.

When his fingers touched the gland deep inside, Avon surged up into his mouth, almost choking him.

"Now!" he hissed furiously at Tarrant. "Now!" Then, suddenly, the order became a plea. "Do it. Fuck me. Now, please."

Tarrant couldn't remember Avon ever saying "please" to him before, and he was more than happy to comply. He smeared more of the lotion onto his

cock and pressed it against his target, moving forward just a little and then withdrawing teasingly. In the end it was Avon who impaled himself by pushing up against Tarrant. Tarrant stopped the teasing and cooperated fully, slipping into Avon's body and leaning forward to enfold him in his arms. Their mouths met and their tongues entwined, so that they were joined as fully as they could possibly be. The sensation of having Avon all around him was indescribable.

Avon twisted and bucked under him like a wild thing. Tarrant pushed himself up on his arms and looked down at his lover again. Avon held Tarrant's forearms and tossed his head back and forth in utter abandon, his sweat-darkened hair falling into his face. This man was everything Tarrant had ever desired in a lover, all in one package. There was the sense of danger that had once made Servalan so exciting, together with the same protective tenderness he had felt for Zeeona, and something else too: the camaraderie that had always been there with Avon, even when they had fought bitterly with each other, back on Liberator so long ago. For this brief space and time, while they shared their bodies, the shared suffering of their lives together was transmuted into something exquisitely sweet.

Tarrant slowed his thrusting. Avon stilled in response and looked up at him questioningly, too far gone in pleasure to articulate the query in his eyes. Tarrant sat back enough to take his weight off his arms. He scooped his arms under Avon's knees and lifted his legs up.

"Finish now," he said breathlessly, "I want to see you come."

Avon looked bewildered for a moment, then smiled slowly. He held Tarrant's eyes with his own while his right hand moved down across his body and gripped his straining cock. He must have been very close already, for with only a few strokes he was in climax, jerking against Tarrant as his seed spread across his stomach. With each spurt, it seemed, his entire body gripped Tarrant's cock. Tarrant felt utterly triumphant and completely entranced, at one and the same time. Avon was his entirely, and he was Avon's.

He gave in to the tide of sensation and let himself follow Avon, pumping his own life into the man he desired above all others. Avon groaned in pleasure as Tarrant took him, hard on the heels of his own orgasm. The sense of sharing was so

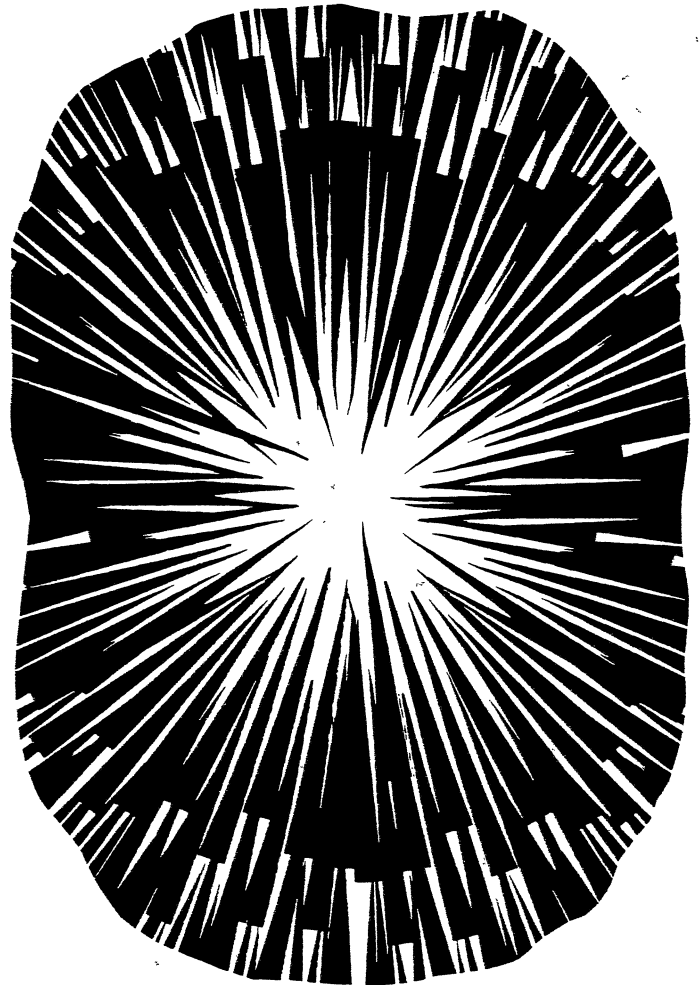
complete that it was as if each of them had come twice in quick succession.

When it was over, Tarrant was completely satiated. It was all he could do to pull out of Avon and roll to the side. Exhaustion and euphoria had left him light headed, and he barely felt Avon snake an arm around him so that they were cradled together in sweaty satisfaction.

Sleep tugged at Tarrant but not before one thought crossed his mind. This was real and permanent. The darkness was truly behind them.

The End

"With thanks to Lexa Reiss for all of her help and encouragement."



Rescue

by
Catherine

Avon lay as he had so often over the last few weeks—naked, sprawled across satin sheets. His eyes were closed. After all, there was nothing new to look at: smooth walls, cases containing objects that he preferred not to dwell on, a small fresher unit, and the bed.

He had long ago given up on the others finding him. That life seemed far in his distant past. He hadn't been able to get to his teleport bracelet on Domo. Servalan had bought him, taking great delight in her acquisition. When typical interrogation tactics had failed, she turned to this, making Avon into one of the most popular sex slaves in Freedom City.

Avon winced slightly as he shifted. Most of his recent visitors had been male, quite aggressively so, and while the medical system was adequate, Servalan had decided that painkillers were coddling her prisoner. Isolated, except for his customers and, occasionally Servalan herself, Avon wondered what had happened to his crew; if they were still searching. But during bouts of exhausted sleep, it wasn't Scorpio's crew he dreamt of. It was one man. It was Blake.

* * *

Tarrant, Vila, and the girls were sitting at a table in a quiet section of the bar. It was as dark and dirty as the rest of the bars on this planet, far from the heart of the Federation. It was a haven for smugglers and, in Orac's opinion, rebels.

"Blake," Vila whispered. "It's got to be."

Tarrant and the girls cautiously watched the figure Vila was so sure of. It hardly looked like the image Vila had given them. Oh he was tall, powerful looking, but the overlong curls were shaggy and the clothes ragged. He had collected a drink and was settling down at a table, alone.

"Vila, are you"

Tarrant didn't get the chance to finish his question. He, Dayna, and Soolin watched uneasily as Vila approached the table.

"Mind if I join you?"

The curly head shot up at the sound of Vila's voice. Rising with a speed that belied his bulk, the big man wrapped Vila in a hug. From the pleased expression on Vila's face, it had to be Blake. The others relaxed slightly, amused as Vila struggled loose and beckoned them to follow. They travelled down several corridors and into a large space docking bay. Vila and Blake entered a ship. The others were close on their heels.

A few minutes later and they all were seated on the flight deck of a powerful cruiser. Blake's appeal was more obvious now. A face that was hard yet one that still hung on to its innocence; his aura of power was all the more captivating in close proximity. Vila introduced them all and Blake seemed genuinely pleased to meet them.

"And Cally?" Blake's baritone gently asked.

Vila shook his head. Blake reached out and absently patted his shoulder. "Jenna too." There was a painful pause before the inevitable question. "Avon?"

"We don't know for sure. Servalan had him but Orac thinks he's on Freedom City."

Blake's expression was hard to read. He seemed angry and fearful and hopeful all at once. "Well, we better go get him, hadn't we?"

Vila nodded and Blake rose.

"You have a teleport?"

After a quick glance at the others, Vila replied. "Yes."

"Then we'll take your ship, Scorpio, right?" Dayna handed Blake a spare bracelet. "And you can explain to me how you lost Avon in the first place."

* * *

That night, Blake lay in one of the bunks on Scorpio. The thought of what had been done to Avon, Orac's details, chilled him to the depths of his soul. His Avon, tortured and forced into sexual slavery. An involuntary shiver coursed down his spine. Avon raped, humiliated, and most likely injured by men who took their pleasure from inflicting pain. And what will I have to do to free you, Blake mused. He knew and he hated it.

"Orac, what is our best chance for freeing Avon?" Blake remembered the eagerness with which he asked the private question. And his horror at the answer.

"The strategy most likely to succeed would involve one man going in as a customer. You would be taken to him to engage in the usual activities. His room is shielded from teleport technology. Tarrant and Vila can disable the shielding device which is located in the master computer center. It should take them an hour or slightly less. When they have done so, they will signal, and you can teleport yourself and Avon to the ship."

Blake had frowned at the solution. "What are the usual activities, Orac, and why are they necessary for this plan?"

"The usual activities include forced fellatio, bondage, beatings, and anal penetration. Their performance is required because all activities are monitored both for security reasons and for Servalan's viewing. You must remain with Avon until you have received the signal. To do so, you must appear as a customer."

It horrified Blake then, and hours later his disgust had not diminished.

Turning over, he lay on his stomach, face pillowed on his arms. He had wanted Avon back on Liberator, had almost gone to him after Gan's death, but was afraid. He had often felt Avon's eyes on him, burning into his back as they stood watch on the flight deck. Even more often he had caught himself watching Avon, usually while the other man was bent over a console or struggling underneath one. The snugly fitting black leather the other man favoured had done little to discourage Blake's hidden desires. But he had feared Avon's scorn or disgust and contented himself with fantasies and his own hands. Now he had to pretend to put those fantasies into reality. At least he wouldn't have to actually do very much to Avon. With any luck, Vila and Tarrant would give the signal soon after he arrived and they'd be able to escape.

Turning over again, he sighed. He couldn't sleep before, worried about what had happened. Now he was worried about what would happen, worried and unwillingly aroused. Resolutely turning his back to the flight deck, he stared at the wall, counting sheep that turned into Avons as he finally dozed off.

* * *

"You do realize, of course, that he's quite expensive, and difficult." The woman spoke quietly and calmly. As if she were discussing some pet as opposed to a man, Blake thought sourly. But he smiled and inclined his head.

"I do indeed. That's why I'm willing to meet your fee. It's no fun for me if he's willing." Blake added. The woman smiled faintly and gestured for him to follow her. Secure that his disguise would grant him anonymity from Servalan, he wondered if Avon would be able to recognize him. Scruffy and bearded, he looked little like he had on Liberator. His curls were dyed black, contacts turning his eyes blue.

Stopping abruptly so as not to run into the woman, Blake tried to collect his thoughts and go over his plan as she unlocked the door. It opened silently.

"There is an intercom by the door. Let us know when you are ready to leave. Enjoy."

"I'm sure I will." Blake replied automatically, stepping through, the door closing firmly behind him. He was already tense, waiting for the signal, anxiety over what he might have to do while he waited for it making him break out in a sweat. His eyes widened as he took in the room. Even though Orac had been informative, he hadn't been prepared for this.

The room was lit with a red glow, highlighting, in Blake's mind, its sinister aspects. The carpet was thick plush, no doubt to muffle sound. What appeared to be clear plastic cases on the wall contained all manner of devices, bondage equipment, dildos, cockrings, whips. And on the black satin covered bed lay Avon. He was clearly angry and frustrated, maybe a little uncertain, and certainly not yet able to recognize his former crewmate. Blake wanted to reach out and comfort him and was struck by the enormity of the role he had taken on. They had an audience and he a part to play. Yet, Avon looked so vulnerable, completely naked, no weapons. But Blake had forgotten something.

"Are you here to stare or fuck?"

Caustic and arrogant, my Avon, Blake mused. You always did cover your fears with anger. Intended for the camera, a dangerous smile curved his full lips as he approached the bed.

"Both perhaps. I'm here to amuse myself, with you." He hoped that Vila and Tarrant wouldn't take too long. He darted a quick glance at his watch. As soon as he received the signal.... His hand slipped down into his pocket, fingering the teleport bracelets concealed there.

Avon's gaze had narrowed at the sound of his voice and Blake had the feeling that Avon was already suspicious. He could disguise his appearance but not his voice. Hopefully, Servalan wouldn't recognize it. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to do anything very serious to Avon. Tie him up, taunt him. The others should be signaling soon.

Abruptly, Blake reached down, twisting fingers into silky hair, pulling the head back, exposing the delicate skin of the neck. Before Avon could react, he bent, whispering before biting gently. "It's Blake, play along with me, Avon." Pulling back, as if to admire the marks left by his teeth, Blake saw surprised disbelief mixed with recognition.

"What the hell!"

Without releasing his grip on Avon's hair, Blake struck, a left-handed slap that left its mark in stark relief against pale skin. If Avon gave it away before the signal came, they'd both be lost! Hand stinging, he hoped Avon would understand and forgive the rough treatment. With any luck, the others would work fast and a few slightly rough games would be all that was required. Intercourse was the last step though. Orgasm would spell the end of his session with Avon, and he'd have to leave him here alone.

Bending low to lick at the spot his hand had marked, Blake tried again. "I'm here to rescue you, you prick! The room is being videotaped and it's shielded. The others will signal when we can teleport."

Blake could feel the tension radiating off the other man. He had no choice but to assume Avon would accept that Blake was here to rescue him and that this was the only way to do so. Whispers in the ear were not for pleasure slaves. Besides, what else could he do? Avon's acceptance was not a requirement, it was wishful thinking on his own part. Avon had always been reluctant to relinquish any sort of control. To relinquish this sort of control to

a man he hadn't seen in two years.... There was no reason to assume that he would be comfortable with it, despite the situation they were in. Standing back, he released Avon with a sharp cuff to the head.

"Not very good, are you?" Blake taunted, moving toward one of the cases. One eye on the other man, he selected several items, placing them on the table beside the bed. He was afraid he'd need to stretch out their encounter as long as he could. The others should have given the signal by now, something must be wrong. He looked back at the toys he had chosen. Deep down, a small part of him acknowledged that he'd long wished for this sort of control. In the privacy of his cabin on *Liberator*, it would have been wonderful, exciting, Avon under his control, his to pleasure and to take pleasure in.

He stared down at the other man. Avon's eyes widened at his choices but he didn't move. Until Blake picked up the leather collar.

"No." This was too much, Avon thought. Strangers using him he could deal with. That was impersonal and he could wall himself away. But with Blake everything was very personal. His own feelings were boiling to the surface and they were not for Blake to see, not like this. Why the hell couldn't he have sent Vila? Avon edged away, unwilling to face his own response to Blake's presence, his strength.

Blake glared and moved closer. Why was Avon so uneasy? A collar would hardly be painful, embarrassing yes, but he'd rather do that than hurt the other man. The whips and other more sinister devices made him feel slightly sick, and he tried to assure himself that the others would give the signal long before he had to resort to anything damaging. Knowing Avon, he would play the role of the angry captive as well as he was able to under the circumstances. Blake didn't want to hurt him but it had to look as if he did, or at least as if he didn't care. But he did care, rather desperately at the moment. Feeling the pain of guilt over what he was to do, what part of him wanted to do, he took a deep breath. Collar in hand, he reached as Avon moved off the bed and across the room.

"I said no!" Avon snarled angrily.

Blake strode over, collar in hand. But when he tried to put it on the other man, Avon struck out, his fist just missing Blake's cheek. Avon was frightened, Blake couldn't help but see it. But why? After all he had been through, he was afraid of Blake?

"Naughty." Blake scolded, trapping the smaller man between him and the wall. The naked body pressed against him was hot and hard, sweat beginning to dampen the dark hair. Taking a deep breath, he inhaled the spicy scent of the man, dream memories crowding to the surface, fantasies in which Avon had demanded his submission, and teased Blake to the point of pain before granting him release.

An old favorite had been the one where he had conquered his fears and gone to Avon after Gan's death. Instead of mocking, Avon had comforted him, seduced him. His dark companion had kissed him softly, and undressed them both. They had fallen into bed, wrapped round each other. Avon had stroked and kissed him all over, sucking nipples and cock until Blake was blind with need. Then he had straddled Blake, a dark tormentor who rode his cock, driving them both over the edge into orgasm. The first time Blake had dreamt that, he'd woken up in a sticky bed.

Blake pulled himself back to the present as Avon's arms came up, pushing him away. That had been a wishful fantasy. Reality was quite a different matter, Blake thought, and their audience would begin to wonder if he didn't do something soon. The others should certainly have reached the generator by now.

Spinning Avon around to face the wall, a well-placed knee kept the smaller man still as the collar was locked in place. Such a vulnerable sight. It stirred Blake's tenderness and his lust.

Grabbing Avon by the collar, Blake tossed him onto the bed, straddling his chest to keep him down. What he hadn't anticipated was his body's powerful reaction to Avon pressed so tightly against him, the stiffening of his cock at the pressure. Despite his captivity, Avon squirmed, his writhing body pressing up against Blake's inner thighs and genitals. Blake swallowed tightly.

"You are feisty." Blake captured a wrist. If Avon kept up with his antics, it'd would be all over before the signal came. What was taking them so long! "We don't want you to hurt yourself, do we?"

Receiving only a snarl in response and renewed struggles, Blake seized a cuff from the table, enclosing the captive wrist and attaching it to the corresponding link on the bedpost. He repeated the manoeuvre on the other wrist and sat back to observe the effect.

Avon's arms were spread wide, his chest

heaving, sweat shining on his face and chest. His eyes were angry, whether in truth or for the role Blake demanded of him, Blake couldn't tell. But it aroused him as Avon's anger always had. Aroused him despite the guilt that such feelings always brought with them. He didn't really want to dominate Avon like that, or at least, he admitted to himself, he shouldn't want to. But he did, gaze dropping away from the angry face. Avon's wine-red cock was half-hard, nestled between pale muscular thighs and Blake ached to touch, to taste, to trace a salty path from face to crotch. Instead, he spoke.

"You're beautiful when you're angry." He traced the aristocratic profile with a fingertip, bringing the sweat to his lips. Desperate for the signal to come soon, he was overly aware of his own tension. He was also becoming aware of Avon's. His companion was clearly wondering how far Blake was going to go and exactly what he was going to do. Avon had always hated not knowing, not being able to control a situation.

"Get on with it." Avon hissed. "Everybody else did." Why should Blake be any different? Used for Blake's cause or to satisfy a stranger's lust, what was the difference?

Blake sighed softly. "So I will." He frowned as Avon's other comment registered. Of course, Avon thought this was impersonal altruism on his part. He didn't know how Blake really felt. How could he, I never told him, Blake thought. He absently stroked a hand across Avon's abdomen, surprised when he felt the flesh tighten. He looked down, seeing the evidence of Avon's reaction to his gentle touch. If only that would satisfy their audience.

Avon tried to hold back his gasp of pleasure as Blake gently stroked him. No, I don't want him to see how much he affects me. Avon was getting desperate. He didn't want to react to the other man's touch but he couldn't help it. Blake's hands were warm and tender in their soft caresses and Avon was reminded of too many dreams he had while Blake was gone. Dreams in which they had admitted their needs and satiated each other. Blake had been caring yet fiercely passionate, submitting when Avon needed him to, taking when Avon needed to give. The memories were arousing in themselves. Avon was helpless to prevent his body's reaction.

"I thought this was supposed to be for my pleasure."

Thoughtfully, Blake picked up a cockring

and gag. He was running out of things to do to Avon that wouldn't hurt him! Waiting for the signal was driving him crazy. Why were they taking so long? Fingering the gag, Blake decided to use it. It looked wicked but it couldn't hurt him. Avon certainly wouldn't like it but Blake didn't want to hurt him and he was out of options.

Caressing Avon's erection, Blake watched the dark eyes close, lips parting. At least he's not fighting it now. Silky soft skin over hard need, Blake stroked him, feeling the swelling pulse. But he's still not going to be amused. Handling him is the only way of prolonging this. Let him touch you and you'll be over the edge in a flash. Blake ignored the tiny voice in his head that whispered of the other men's failure to eliminate the generator. Could he carry through with a full session? Could Avon handle it from him? Sliding his hand down to the base, Blake slipped the cockring on. Avon's eyes snapped open.

"My pleasure," Blake reminded. "If you satisfy me, I'll see you won't go...unrewarded." Avon glared up at him before glancing away, refusing even to struggle. With a small shiver, Blake recognized his own increasing arousal, his cock swelling uncomfortably within the confines of his trousers. He leaned close to Avon's face and gazed deep into the dark eyes. Very softly, Avon whispered, "Why like this?" One finger traced the outline of Avon's lips as Blake reached for the gag.

"Like this?" Blake paused. Did that mean that if it hadn't been like this... He stared back at the other man. Avon's eyes were tightly closed. Did that mean that Avon wanted him too? Oh, please let me be right.

"I'm not surprised they provided one of these. Wouldn't want you to bite." Trapping Avon's head between his hands, Blake pried open his jaws, forcing the gag in and buckling it securely. Angry and reproachful, Avon stared up at him, panting as the gag restricted his breathing.

He couldn't believe Blake would gag him! He'd rather be beaten than humiliated like that and he knew that Blake must be aware of it. He'd hardly spoken at all so far. Why would Blake do it? Wasn't it enough that Blake controlled his body's response?

"Behave." Blake ordered, releasing Avon's wrists. Unprepared for his captive's reaction, Blake gasped as a foot smacked into his stomach. Avon was angry or afraid, now Blake couldn't decide which. Avon's tirade was choked off by the gag but his legs continued to flail as Blake paused to catch

his breath before roughly securing Avon's hands back to the bedposts, the smaller man now belly down, arms spread-eagled across the bed.

"That wasn't very nice." Blake stated calmly, one hand caressing Avon's exposed back and buttocks. Avon was making it harder than he had to. If Blake didn't retaliate, their audience would wonder why. He knew Avon couldn't be happy about being fucked yet again but at least it was Blake, not some paying customer who was turned on by hurting him. Guilt surged through him for his actions to come as well as anger at the others for not coming to their rescue. With a sharp jerk, he pulled Avon up onto his knees.

"You need to learn how to behave, to be obedient to your master." He slipped a finger into Avon's crease, finding his anus and pressing lightly. The body beneath him quivered and Blake forced a laugh as he withdrew his hand, playing to their audience.

"You need something anyway." Or their audience would, they would be expecting things to heat up by now. Sitting up, Blake looked uneasily at the well-stocked cases. No way would he whip Avon, any of the ones provided would break the skin. Something wider...ah, his own belt would do nicely. Painful perhaps, but not damaging. Removing it, he placed it against Avon's cheek, letting him feel it, see it. Slowly, he dragged it over the skin of Avon's back, the rise of his buttocks. Once he let it brush against the sensitive skin of testicles, hearing Avon's moan despite the muffling gag.

"Like that, don't you? Feeling vulnerable, wide-open to me?" Blake hoped their audience enjoyed his commentary. Blake pulled away the belt. "I can do anything to you." It was true and Blake shivered with that knowledge, with the feeling of power it gave him. Avon had trusted him once, would he still trust after this night? What would they have to do before they were free of this place, before the signal would come?

Without warning, the belt smacked into Avon's ass. Blake felt his own cock tingle as Avon flinched. He shouldn't be turned on by this, he thought, but he couldn't help it. He pressed his hand to the heat of Avon's ass, a gentle caress before the belt rose. Again and again the blows rained down, turning pale white skin to a flushed angry red despite Blake's attempts to keep the blows light. Not a sound came from his captive.

Avon bit down on the gag, trying to clench

his teeth against the pain of the blows. His ass was on fire, a new burst of pain with each stroke. Blake's breathing was loud in his ears, a counterpoint to the thundering of his own heart, the harshness of his own struggling breaths. His muscles were beginning to twitch in anticipation of the blows, his cock still aching erect, the tight cockring preventing anything else. He moaned faintly around the gag as the blows tailed off.

Finally Blake dropped the belt, realizing that the blows were becoming too painful. The signal still hadn't come and there was a horrible sinking feeling in his chest. He was going to have to go through with it. All of it because at this point he had no choice. Either he fuck Avon or else he'd have to turn to the other toys provided and they could only cause Avon pain and serious physical harm. Nervously, Blake shed his clothes. What would Avon think of him? Blake almost laughed at himself. This was hardly the time to worry about whether Avon would find him attractive or repulsive. But he couldn't help how he felt or how aroused he was, his cock fully erect and throbbing.

Avon shivered at the sight. Blake was going to fuck him. The rebel had shed his clothes quickly as Avon had watched. Blake was...impressive. The smooth hairless skin of his chest tapered down to the stomach and thighs. Thighs which framed a painfully large cock. Avon had been fucked many times but not by anything like that. It was beautiful and frightening, as was his own response.

Running a gentle hand over Avon's too hot skin, Blake handled the abused flesh gently.

"How does it feel, pricktease? Hot and tingling? Ready for me to fill you up?"

Bending forward to see Avon's face, Blake was shocked by the damp trace of tears on spiky lashes. Avon had cried? His guilt sharpening, he wished for nothing more than to teleport them now. Nothing more than the impossible. He had never seen Avon cry, not even when shot. Do you think I want to do this? Blake wondered. I haven't betrayed your trust, Avon. This is the only way! He bent lower, whispering as softly as he could. "I have to, Avon, the video cameras. Servalan could be watching."

Avon's eyes widened in shock, a muffled protest escaping. No wonder Blake was going through the routine so thoroughly. Servalan had never mentioned watching. If she were now, she'd notice a customer who was unusually kind. She'd

also notice his own reactions, his unwilling arousal at this man's hands.

Blake tried to disguise his concern with a hand on Avon's ass but he couldn't take his eyes off his face. Bright red stained the pale cheeks, as red as the flushed ass. The signal hadn't come and there was nothing else, nothing else but to fuck Avon and hope that nothing had gone seriously wrong, that the signal would finally come.

Tearing his eyes away from the expression of horror on Avon's features, he picked up the tube of lubricant on the table, smoothing the cool gel onto his throbbing cock, gritting his teeth at the sensation. He had to finish this now. As soon as it was over, he could gather his clothes without suspicion and get them to safety.

"Bet you love it when they do this." Kneeling behind Avon, he seized the trembling hips. Cock at Avon's entrance, he thrust hard, ignoring the whimpering that escaped past the gag, the desperate writhing of the body beneath him. He was big and, despite being used by others, Avon was going to hurt. The lubricant would help but it wouldn't be enough, not with Avon so tense. But a customer would hardly care so neither could he and he drove repeatedly into the body beneath him, the tight clenching driving him to the edge. The body holding him was hot and shaking and Blake caressed Avon's sides and chest, hoping he wasn't hurting too badly, unable to do anything about it. Avon was so hot and tight, holding Blake. Tears leaked from beneath Blake's tightly closed lids. He was torn between the command of his mind to go slow and easy and his body's imperative to be hard and fast, driving them both into mind blowing ecstasy. It was horrible; it was wonderful.

A final hard thrust and Avon clenched tightly, the incredible friction tipping Blake over the edge into orgasm. He collapsed onto Avon's back, driving them both down onto the bed.

Catching his breath, Blake withdrew, accompanied by a faint moan from Avon. Checking carefully, he was relieved that there was no blood at least. But he was anything but relieved by the absence of the signal. He was at a loss, what was he to do now? Slipping a hand under the other man, Blake was not surprised to find him still erect. The cockring would have prevented anything else. Removing the gag and reaching for a pre-lubed dildo, Blake stroked the sweaty back. This was something that he could do, something that would

help Avon as opposed to hurting him.

"You need some help." It wasn't a question and Avon remained silent. "You pleased me and I did promise a reward. Ask for it and it's yours."

Blake watched Avon swallow, the red stain of humiliation again tinting his complexion. Blake brushed a finger against the swollen cock, enjoying Avon's gasp, wanting to give him this, wishing he could give him so much more. I love you, Avon.

Avon was silent, unable, or unwilling, to beg for release.

"Your body begs for you." Blake spoke very softly as he once more parted the buttocks, slowly inserting the dildo as Avon squirmed uncomfortably. Blake took his time, determined not to cause Avon any more pain. A quick twist and the cockring was gone, Avon's sigh of relief followed by a moan of pleasure as Blake gripped his cock, stroking in time with the rhythm of the dildo rubbing against his prostate. Avon's head tossed, bringing a smile to Blake's lips. He couldn't have hurt him too badly if this felt so good now. Slowing the rhythm of the dildo, he gripped the base of Avon's cock lightly, a gentler restraint than that provided by the tight cockring. he kept up the slow and steady pattern, giving as much pleasure as he could, drawing it out as long as he dared. When he felt Avon could hold on no longer, he bent down, brushing his lips against the damp cockhead.

Avon gasped at the increased stimulation, his hands clenched tightly into fists, thighs shaking with the strain. A few seconds later, Blake felt the increase in tension as Avon came, cock spilling onto the sheets as Avon collapsed limply across them.

Silently Blake withdrew the dildo and released the cuffs, only the collar remaining. He was desperate for the signal! Had the others failed, been captured? He tossed the sheet over Avon. He would give him what dignity he could, despite the circumstances. How you must have hated this, he mused, hand brushing Avon's chest. I wish I could say that I had. But part of me loved it, Avon, while the other half despised me for it. He felt his hand tremble and pulled away.

Avon's eyes were closed once more but Blake kept one eye on him as he got dressed. Zipping up his pants and tucking in his shirt, he went over to the intercom. He had one option left. Pay for another session. Claim that he wanted another round with his pleasure slave.

"I'd like to purchase another session." Blake

waited for a response. He was surprised by the form in which it came but let none of that surprise show. It was Servalan who opened the door.

Servalan's gaze raked over Avon's body and Blake saw that he was very much alert. She stepped closer, running a hand over Avon's damp chest. "I quite enjoyed watching you subjugate him. Bound and gagged, he's quite appealing."

Blake wanted to strangle her, was shocked at the intensity of his own fury. Trying to control himself he was distracted. He heard something. Very faintly the bracelets in his pocket were chiming. It was over!

Relief screaming through him, Blake smiled at Servalan, stepping to Avon's side as if to haul him to his feet. Instead, he snapped a bracelet onto Avon's wrist and another to his own, signalling for teleport. His last sight was Servalan's shocked expression as she recognized the teleport bracelets.

* * *

Avon lay on the bed in his cabin. After teleporting, Soolin had dragged him off to medical and then sent him to his cabin to rest. Alone. But a few hours later he had summoned Blake. He needed to make sure Blake was staying. He wanted him to stay rather badly. After all, he had looked for him for a long time, he reminded himself. It'd be a pity to waste the opportunity.

There were also things he needed to know, especially if Blake was to stay. He needed to know how Blake felt about what had happened, how Blake felt about him. It was hard to believe that Blake's opinion of him wouldn't change. Blake had seen what had happened to him, what he had been made to do. Used and abused by Blake as well as the many others before him, there was a lot of anger too. Not because of what Blake had done, but because of what he had seen. Avon humiliated and degraded, yet still aching with desire for Blake. Avon shivered, angry with them both, and unsure of Blake's reactions. Startled by a knock at his door, his attention was sharply focused on the man waiting there.

"Blake."

Blake nervously stepped into the cabin, sitting in a chair next to the bed. "Yes."

Avon's gaze was unreadable but Blake couldn't tear his eyes away. The smaller man looked much better. Clean and safe, yet still vulnerable

sitting up in bed, bare-chested, Blake wanted to hold him, protect him, fuck him through the mattress and be fucked in turn. He also felt guilty as hell for what he had put Avon through and wondered if Avon would forgive or punish him. He didn't know which he would prefer.

"At least you came." Avon paused. Blake seemed very ill at ease, not surprising, he reminded himself, remember how he last saw you. He stared at Blake, at the face that had haunted his dreams these last two years. He had wanted Blake and denied himself for so long, lost him, and now had him back. But did Blake want him? Did he want Blake after what Blake had seen? The rebel had performed for an audience. Was it just a performance?

"Avon, I'm so sorry you had to go through that." Blake tentatively touched Avon's arm, stroking the inner wrist with one gentle, wistful finger. "I didn't want to hurt you. I was hoping that none of that would be necessary."

"But you did hurt me, Blake. You saw me beaten and humiliated." Avon's eyes glittered with anger. "Oh yes, I had been treated far worse by others. But you have your own special style." Avon felt the intensity of Blake's gaze, the guilt and pity in his eyes, and he turned away.

Blake licked his lips nervously. "Avon, I need to tell you something."

The dark head didn't turn but Avon's voice came clearly. "Go ahead. You always do."

"Avon, I didn't want to hurt you down there. But I did want to love you. I have for a long time." There it was out. It was up to Avon now.

Avon was sitting very still, his heart pounding. Love or pity? Blake was capable of acting on either. Regardless, Avon wanted to strike out, to make Blake ache as he had ached, humiliated by his own response to the other man's touch. He turned to face the other man.

"I looked for you." There was no emotion in his voice.

"Vila told me. I'm sorry."

"I'm not, not now. Though that's not exactly the way I hoped we'd find each other."

Blake's heart sank at the harsh cold of Avon's voice. Avon wouldn't forgive. He hadn't expected him to forget but...how could he stay with Scorpio, knowing Avon hated him? Chest aching, Blake reached out, his hand dropping before it reached Avon's face.

"I do love you."

"You have an interesting way of showing it." Avon said with a vengeance.

At the mocking words, Blake's rage finally erupted. He loved him but he'd be damned if he'd leave without saying what he truly felt.

"You bastard! I went down there for you. Put my life at risk, not to mention Tarrant's and Vila's, to get you out. I don't enjoy humiliation, Avon. I leave that pleasure to you. Everything I did was for you, to buy us the time we needed to get away. You may hate me for it but I'd prefer that to you spending the rest of your life in there."

Face red from shouting, Blake glared at Avon, waiting for a reaction to his words. It was not what he expected.

"Can you honestly say that you can look at me now and not see me as I was down there?"

So that was it! Blake sighed. Avon was afraid that he has lost something in Blake's eyes by what he had done. Had done to him, Blake corrected himself. If he felt that strongly, Blake thought furiously, he must care what I think. Which means he cares about what I think, about me. He considered Avon's question and blushed uncomfortably. When put like that, he'd never forget what he saw, what he experienced. But it didn't change how he felt about the other man. Avon was Avon.

He looked up, seeing the dark head bowed. Avon spoke very softly. "Obviously, you can not."

"I'll never forget what happened, Avon. It doesn't change who you are, how I feel about you. I loved you before. I still do." He watched Avon's head tilt up, eyes looking anguished, vulnerable. "Did you hate what I did to you so much?"

"The humiliation, the audience, yes." Blake felt a tightness squeeze his chest. Avon paused and a slightly self-conscious smile touched the smaller man's lips. "Parts of it were quite enjoyable, however."

There he had said it, Avon thought. It was as much as he could admit now.

"You liked it?" Surprise coloured Blake's voice, mixing with the guilt and shock he felt over the way he had handled Avon. Bondage was one thing, abuse another.

Avon paused before answering. He was making an important decision. Once he accepted Blake, the rebel would never let him go. He wanted that security yet feared it too. Although, at the moment, it seemed incredibly desirable. Blake loved him despite what had happened. If Blake loved him,

it didn't seem to matter as much that he didn't love himself. There was no longer any decision to make as he answered Blake's question.

"Parts of it. Gag me again and you'll regret it! I don't like to be forced into something like that. Now if you were to ask nicely..." Avon sounded very sure and surprisingly at ease as he trailed off suggestively.

Blake's eyes widened in surprised but he was overjoyed at Avon's response. "I'll remember to ask politely."

"Good. No need for you to wallow in your usual guilt then." A faint smile touched Avon's lips as he lay back down. "Are you staying?" The words were spoken lightly but Blake suspected the question involved more than his staying with Scorpio, suspected more had happened here than he was aware of.

"Do you want me to?" Blake knew how he felt. He wanted to stay with Avon. He could fight the Federation wherever he was. He wanted to be with Avon. Besides, Avon had fought them in Blake's absence. He knew he could convince Avon to fight them again, together.

"What do you think?" Avon pulled back the bedsheets.

"Yes." Blake quickly shed his clothes, slipping into the Avon-warmed bed, arms wrapping around the smaller figure. Nudging Avon over onto his side, Blake nestled against his back.

"Avon?"

"Hmm?" Avon glanced over as Blake's hands explored his chest.

"Would you ever want to do that to me?" Blake watched as Avon turned over, placing one finger against his right nipple, a lightly furred leg slipping between his thighs. He knew that a part of him wanted Avon to, felt that he should, that it had to happen.

"What do you think?" Avon lifted an eyebrow, smiling suggestively, and Blake swallowed. Despite his exhaustion, he felt a faint twitch of desire mixed with nervous anticipation. He opened his mouth to speak.

Avon pressed a quick kiss to Blake's parted lips. "Go to sleep, Blake."

"We need to talk."

"Later, I'm tired." Avon let his head rest against Blake's smooth chest.

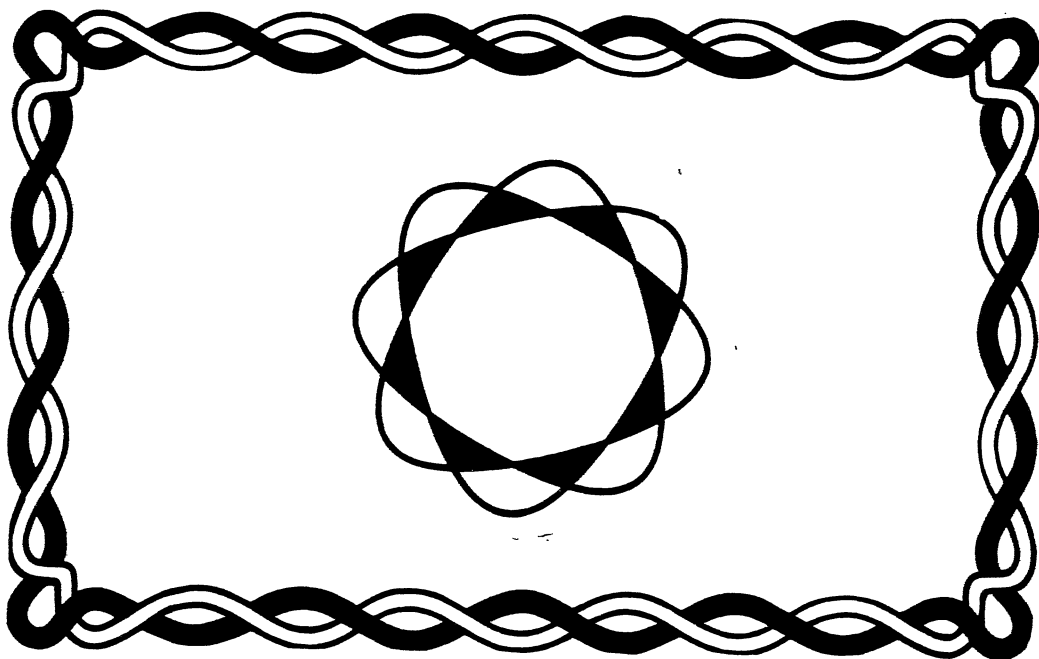
"Sorry."

"No, you're not, not really. But you will be if I don't get some sleep."

Blake smiled, tightening his grip on his companion. "Goodnight, Avon."

He received a simple acknowledgement but it was enough, for now.

The End



Without

by
Dee

Saw Doyle today. At least, it could've been him; I didn't hang about to see if it really was. Hard to believe we used to be partners. I remember all that crap he used to spout. Listening to him, you'd swear he lived in some kind of bleedin' fantasy-land, where you could trust that the next bloke you saw wouldn't do you over for a quid, or a fag, or just for the fun of it. Self-interest? According to Doyle, it's a dirty word. We were supposed to be doing the job we did for the good of the country, not for what it paid.

And back then, I sometimes believed he might be right. But back then, I was a fool. Must have been, not to have learned better from what I'd seen, where I'd been, what I'd had done to me. Even as a kid. My da certainly beat it into me enough times: you can only count on yourself. Anybody else says you can rely on him—it's time to start wondering what he thinks he can gain from it.

I knew what George Cowley wanted when he took me on. He wanted someone who'd follow orders—most of the time. Someone who could kill for him when it was necessary. Someone he could hang the blame on if whatever chancy venture he'd undertaken attracted official displeasure from above. The mistake I made was forgetting to remember that.

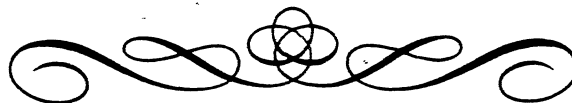
My da booted me out when it suited him; Cowley did the same. Oh, he made sure that it didn't go to trial. Probably reckoned that

CIS—and him—would come off looking a little shady if one of his hand-picked agents was sent to gaol for murder. Even the murder of a piece of filth like King Billy. More like disposing of vermin in my mind, but I couldn't convince anyone else of that. Suppose I should be grateful. Suppose I should be grateful Cowley didn't shoot me himself, too, when he got to that clearing and found me, and what was left of Billy.

Back to Doyle, though. Made it clear what he thought of me, back then. The funny bit is that I'd thought he believed what he said about us bein' more than just partners, about us watching out for each other even when it wasn't a matter of bullets flying about. But like I said, I was a fool. Hell, I even felt bad about leaving Doyle behind when I left.

Took me a while to realize that I'm better off without him.

The End



Just For Fun

by
Catherine and Katharina

Trapped beneath his lover's powerful body, Doyle twisted, enjoying the play at dominance that Bodie so rarely engaged in. Bodie's weight pressed down on him, holding him in place as the larger man ravaged his mouth. Ray shivered as he remembered the magazine he had flipped through during their last op. Murph had left it there. Naked men and women, bound with black leather, restrained, unable to respond as they were touched, explored by their companions. Doyle moaned into the kiss, watching as Bodie's long lashes lifted.

Breathing hard, Bodie broke their kiss, ending it with a gentle bite to Doyle's upper lip. "Where's the K/Y?"

"Drawer," Doyle mumbled, still licking at his lover's lips. Reluctantly, he wriggled out of the embrace and reached for the bedside table. His glance fell on the untidy pile of clothes they had shed earlier. A pair of handcuffs had slipped out of a pocket and gleamed in the dim light. Doyle held his breath for a moment. This could be the right moment to try to see how Bodie would react. His blood surged as he imagined the possibilities... Suggesting this in a moment of passion would be easier than to broach the subject when they were both *sober* and unaroused. Easier to play it down as a momentary lapse in taste if the reaction was not favorable... Doyle took the tube of gel out of the drawer and swiftly grabbed the handcuffs as well. Bodie was still lying on his side, reaching out to embrace him.

Doyle quickly placed the tube beside him under the pillow. Mutely, with a wide-eyed glance

at Bodie, he held the cuffs out to his partner. Puzzled, Bodie frowned at the cold, gleaming metal. "What...?"

He looked at the passion-filled eyes, passed over the bruised, swollen lips, back to the hand holding the restraints. Comprehension dawned. Slowly, his eyes boring into Doyle's, he took the cuffs.

Doyle watched wide-eyed as Bodie's thumb caressed the metal in his hand. A predatory smile tilted Bodie's lips as he held out his free hand, waiting.

"Your hands."

Doyle heard the huskiness in his lover's voice, but there was steel beneath it; the kind of steel that was rarely shown to him. Palms up, wrists exposed, he extended his arms, letting Bodie grasp them; he watched, mesmerized as Bodie lifted them to his mouth, pressing soft lips to both before imprisoning one in cold steel. Heart pounding now, Doyle pressed forward against Bodie's chest.

Bodie chuckled, "No way, Sunshine. Back you go."

Bodie watched as Doyle's eyes flicked from the cuff encircling his wrist back to his own eyes. Transferring both wrists to one hand, Bodie placed his other on Doyle's chest, pressing back. "Down, Ray; you don't want me to force you. Or do you?" He smiled down at Ray who was very aroused and starting to squirm; so he pressed harder, forcing Doyle onto his back. Doyle panted beneath him.

So good, Bodie.

Ray watched with more than a hint of anticipation as Bodie pulled his arm above his head and between the brass railings. Wordlessly, with an intent glance at him, Bodie lay on top of him and forced his other arm up, placing the chain of the cuffs around one of the railings. Looking into Bodie's eyes, he heard a second click. Bodie's smile widened as he pulled sharply. He was truly bound, his arms stretched above his head. He pulled against the restraint, testing it, feeling his muscles strain, a tingling starting in the pit of his stomach. Bodie leaned over not to kiss but to nip first one then the other nipple, eliciting a gasp from Doyle.

Steadying himself with one arm on either side of Doyle's chest, Bodie scrutinized his lover's face. "Kinky, Ray. What do you want me to do?"

When there was no reply he continued, "Turn you on does it—to be tied up like this?"

"Yes," was the husky answer. Bodie moved

back to sit on Ray's thighs, effectively trapping his legs as well. He was careful not to touch the weeping cock that begged for his attention.

"And what d'you want me to do with you now?"

A dirty chuckle with an underlying hint of nervousness was his answer. "Run out of imagination, have you?"

"Your scenario, Ray. You've set this up, so you tell me what you want. Bit of erotic pain, that it? Spank your bum until it's red hot and burning? Fuck you hard and fast into the mattress?"

Bodie's voice was different from the way he usually talked when they made love, harsher, more commanding. He had assumed a sinister appearance, reminding Ray of Bodie's behaviour in interrogation. Even his mouth seemed to look brutal.

Ray shivered in a combination of fear and arousal, remaining mute, hoping Bodie would understand. Bodie always understood. Heart pounding, he stared as Bodie began a slow appraisal of his body.

"You do know what happens to naughty boys, don't you?"

Doyle shivered in anticipation at the hint of threat in his partner's voice, trying to imagine what Bodie was going to do next. Moving back, Bodie spread his partner's legs, settling himself between them. Slowly, he reached down, rubbing at the slender legs which pressed against his calves, eyes never leaving Ray's. Blue ice gazed down at Ray, as hot hands slid up his legs, thighs, forcing them wide, wider, almost to the point of pain. And held him there. Gasping, achingly aroused, Doyle tried to move, but Bodie pressed harder, and Doyle yelped.

"No way, Goldilocks. If bondage is what you want, bound is what you're gonna be."

Bodie narrowed his gaze as he watched, trying to keep up the act of dominance that Ray seemed to want. But it wasn't hard. He was enjoying this role, liked the idea of Doyle submissive, writhing to his command. He felt the fine-toned muscles under his hands shiver and looked up. Ray's eyes were closed, mouth open and panting. Inching closer, Bodie used his own thighs to keep Doyle's widespread.

A hard slap to his face and Ray's eyes snapped open, shock and amazement written plainly on his features. It hadn't really been painful but... Bodie was staring hard at him. The hand that had struck twisted into his curls, forcing his head up,

bending his body uncomfortably.

He winced. "Bodie, no."

"No?" Bodie's eyebrow lifted mockingly. "But that's what you wanted, mate, isn't it? And don't you say 'no' to me!"

Running a gentle finger up Doyle's cock he teased the organ until a drop of fluid formed on top of the little slit. He licked it away, leaving Doyle gasping.

With a swift movement, he then moved to Doyle's side, turned his lover on his stomach, and sat on the back of his thighs, just above the knees. Doyle's wrists were crossed over now, and he could hardly move, legs pinned down by Bodie's weight, but the position wasn't uncomfortable. He was very aware of his hardness pressed into the mattress and the vulnerability of his exposed arse. His cock was aching and he needed to, *had* to move, grinding it into the bed, searching for release.

"Stop!" But Doyle didn't obey the harsh command, intent on his body's needs. Although he had been anticipating something of the sort, the blow to his right buttock made him yelp in surprise.

"Okay, love," Bodie's voice sounded deceptively gentle, "don't move a muscle or utter a sound unless I say you can."

"Okay," Doyle murmured into his own shoulder.

He was struck on the other buttock. "I told you not to talk! Got that, mate?"

This time, Doyle knew better than to reply. But he still couldn't prevent a sharp gasp as Bodie's hand came down even harder. He could feel his muscles tighten and relax, felt himself rise to meet the next blow, a helpless moan escaping. What would it be like if Bodie were already inside him, the heavy cock piercing him deeply, his muscles clenched tightly, flexing with the blows? He shivered at the thought, and at the tingling pain. Waiting for the next blow, he flinched as Bodie simply caressed the heat of his arse.

"Nice and warm, eh Ray? I like you this way, arse in the air." Bodie slid a thumb between the reddened cheeks, feeling them quiver with tension-filled desire. "Making you all nice and warm for my cock. Make you all slick for me too." He leant forward and forced a finger inside Doyle's mouth. "Make it wet!" he ordered. Doyle complied, sucking obediently at the blunt digit, thinking of where it was going next. In his imagination, he could almost feel the sweet intrusion, but when Bodie's

finger deserted his mouth and aimed at its goal, the reality of the penetrating probe instantly ignited his nerves and sent another jolt through his groin.

The finger was stiff and unrelenting, making him wriggle. Instantly, his disobedience was punished with another blow to his already tingling arse while a second finger wormed its way in to widen the narrow passage still further. Doyle concentrated on keeping still and not groaning when the fingers scissored, stretching him, then finding his prostate. It was impossible for him to remain still or quiet as Bodie's pressing fingers sent jolt after jolt of ecstasy through his trembling body while each of his movements or moans were followed by a resounding slap to his arse cheeks or the back of his thighs, the one sensation combining with and complementing the other.

Breathing fast, lips slightly parted, Bodie looked down at the wanton abandon of his lover's captive body. The power he wielded over Ray exhilarated and aroused him. He could have taken him right then; only the wish to find out about Doyle's limits, to see how far he could push him, gave him enough control. Doyle felt his arse abandoned with a final sharp smack, then Bodie was rolling him onto his back. Ray winced as his sore bum rubbed against the sheets.

"Look at me, Ray." It was Bodie's commanding voice and it drew Doyle's eyes instantly. In Bodie's free hand was the lube Ray had retrieved earlier.

At a loss for words, Doyle simply continued to stare at his lover who was so transformed in comparison to his usual gentle lovemaking. Bodie grazed first one then the other nipple with the cold metal tube. Doyle winced, trying to evade the coldness but Bodie followed his squirming movements, then dropped the cold thing on Ray's stomach and started to slide his fingertips along Doyle's armpits.

"Bodie!"

"Yes, love?" Bodie asked calmly, gently tugging some tufts of hair. Carried away with the passion of the moment, both had already completely forgotten about Bodie's command to remain silent.

"It tickles, you bastard! Can't take that!" he replied with another sharp gasp to the next gentle attack with fingernails.

"Well, you're tied, so you'll just have to, won't you?" Bodie said smugly. "And this, too..." he added, transferring his teasing fingertips to the

insides of Doyle's thighs.

"Bodie! This is torture!"

"Isn't that what you wanted, sunshine?"

Doyle wiggled desperately, trying to escape the tormenting fingers. Bodie was smiling down at him, one large capable hand pressing down on his abdomen as the other picked up the metal tube. Ray waited breathlessly, expecting Bodie to use the contents, to get on with it. But he didn't. Instead, Bodie traced the cool metal across hot skin, up Doyle's quivering thighs, inching towards his cock.

"This what you want, Ray?"

"Christ, Bodie, don't tease."

"No?" Bodie asked wonderingly. "You mean you don't want me to do this?" He placed the tube against Doyle's cock, watching it quiver in response, feeling the response beneath his other hand. Moving it slowly down and back, tip to root, he pressed further, until the rounded tube lay against the delicate skin between Doyle's buttocks. Pressing slightly, Bodie saw a moment's fear flicker in Doyle's eyes and it spurred him on. Doyle wanted the pretense of dominance and submission—well, he'd get it. And like it.

"Bodie, please." Doyle's voice was very husky, desperate, making Bodie ache more than he would have believed possible.

"What, Sunshine? You want this?" Bodie increased the pressure, feeling the metal slip against the tender skin. "Or something else?"

Doyle remained silent, his only answer the rasping of his breath, his pupils dilating as he continued to watch Bodie.

A sudden idea made Bodie smile and open the tube. "Well, whatever it is you want—better be prepared, eh?" With that, he circled the nozzle of the tube once with his middle finger to make sure it had no sharp edges, squeezed a small amount out and distributed it around the nozzle while Doyle watched mesmerized, unbelievably. With almost clinical detachment, he then spread Doyle's buttocks with the fingers of the other hand to expose the small opening and carefully inserted the front end of the tube. He watched Doyle's face as he winced when the cool metal found its way into his body, how the expression of his eyes changed as Bodie pressed the tube, the slick jelly streaming into the sensitive channel, chilling it.

Doyle licked his lips; his cock twitched and his body arched at the sensation, cold and wet. He shivered as Bodie smiled wickedly.

"Too cold, Sunshine? We'll soon fix that." Removing the tube with a twist that made Doyle gasp, Bodie squeezed a generous amount into his own palm. "Watching, Ray? I'm getting him ready for you."

Doyle panted softly as he watched Bodie apply the gel, wrapping his hand round his own cock, slicking it down. Ray could see his grip tighten, creamy fluid forming at the tip. He glanced up at Bodie's face, watched it tense up with desperate yearning. He flushed as that sensual gaze travelled up his body from groin to face. Bodie's fingertip caressed the head of his cock, gathering the moisture, then tracing that fingertip along Ray's full lips. Closing his eyes, Ray sucked the finger in, taking this little bit of Bodie inside him, as he would soon take even more.

The finger was withdrawn, replaced by soft lips and a questing tongue as Bodie tasted himself on Ray's lips.

"Please, Bodie." Ray broke the kiss, gasping after a breath.

"Think you're ready for him?"

"Yes," his partner breathed, squirming below him. Bodie rimmed the sphincter once with his thumb and then slowly, teasingly inserted the finger still slick with Ray's saliva, gently rimming him. He watched his lover's face as he slid the finger in as far as it would go, and once again finding his prostate, pressed gently, teasingly. Doyle drew in his breath sharply, his cock weeping. Satisfied, Bodie withdrew his finger again and leaned forward to rub his slick cock along Doyle's cleft.

"Get on with it, mate! You - tease!" Doyle threw his head back and tugged at his bonds frustratedly. Bodie was enjoying himself immensely. Watching his partner's desperate writhing, his frustrated desire to be taken, the beautiful body spread out for his pleasure, brought him very close to the edge. But he wanted to make it last and take full advantage of Doyle's willingness to experiment.

"Close your eyes!" he ordered. Doyle complied but peeked through his lashes and was promptly caught by Bodie.

"No cheating! Keep 'em closed or you'll regret it. Leave you high and dry I will." Bodie vowed.

The threat worked. Bodie let Doyle's thighs go for a moment and leant over the edge of the bed to reach for one of his shoes, removing its lace. He resumed his position between Doyle's thighs,

spreading them as far apart as they would yield, so that his genitals were nicely exposed. Bodie grabbed the shoelace by both ends, pulled tightly, and moved the string up and down Doyle's cock.

"Don't open your eyes!" he warned and then proceeded to wrap the lace around the base of the hard shaft.

"Shit, Bodie. Don't." Doyle strained desperately against his bonds, his eyes shut. He knew Bodie wasn't about to stop. The feel of Bodie's hands on his cock, manipulating him, was enough to bring him to the edge, but Bodie had finished what he was doing, and Doyle was safely contained by the improvised cockring.

Bodie smiled down at the writhing, panting man beneath him. Doyle looked so gorgeous trussed up, arms stretched above his head, muscles tight with tension, sweat beading across the bared skin, thighs trembling with the strain of being so widespread. Collecting the moisture leaking liberally from the tip of his own cock, Bodie traced patterns on the delicate skin of Doyle's inner thighs, keeping his hands away from the constrained cock, enjoying Ray's attempts to provoke him into finishing it.

"Damn it, Bodie! What the hell are you, a prickease? Come on! Do me!" Blind and powerless to satisfy himself, Doyle was desperate for Bodie's touch, for Bodie to fill him, to satisfy the aching in his body. He was aroused almost to the point of pain.

And Bodie could see it, knew he had drawn it out almost as far as he could.

"All right, love. You want it...", Bodie paused to trace gentle fingers across Doyle's exposed anus, watching it contract with a shiver at his delicate touch. "...you got it, Sunshine."

He rearranged their positions by pulling Doyle's thighs on top of his own so that their groins almost touched. "Now watch me!" Mesmerised, Doyle did as he was commanded, as Bodie pumped his cock once, twice, pulling the skin downwards so tightly that his foreskin completely exposed the swollen and glistening glans that seemed to crave the penetration that was to follow.

"Watch me, Ray," Bodie repeated. "I'm going to stuff it up your arse now. How do you want it - slow and sweet or hard and fast, eh?" Answering his own question he continued, "Both, I guess..." he smiled wickedly. While Ray's thighs trembled helplessly, Bodie caressed the sensitive sphincter again and then, leaning forward, used one hand to

hold the buttocks apart while he directed his cock at the spasming entrance. As slowly as he could manage he pressed in, embedding only the head at first, letting Ray savor the almost-painful sensation of being wide-stretched at first entry. With a sobbing breath he managed to contain himself and remained in this position for some moments while gently caressing his lover's captured cock. Ray groaned in frustration and sweet agony while Bodie very slowly slid further into the slick, lubricated channel until his cock was completely swallowed by Ray's body. He rotated his hips and continued to tease the bound cock, then moved to lavish some attention on Ray's nipples, gently pinching and twisting them, making sure not to touch the cock at the same time. Seeing that Ray was getting much too close to the brink, he stopped his teasing and completely withdrew to wait until Ray's arousal had subsided enough so as not to be painful.

Panting himself, Bodie traced a finger along the flawed cheekbone, collecting droplets of sweat and bringing them to his own mouth. Licking them off, he reached down to brush still damp fingers against Ray's swollen lips, watching transfixed as they were taken in and sucked, Ray's tongue slipping between flesh and nail. Who was supposed to be teasing whom here? Bodie wondered, feeling the exquisite ache in his cock and balls intensify. Withdrawing his fingers, he traced down Ray's profile, pressing lightly, warningly, against his throat, feeling his pulse quicken, his eyes grow wider. He smiled as his other hand caressed the soft hair of Doyle's chest, palm pressing gently against an already stiffened nipple. He was rewarded with a muffled whimper from the man beneath him and renewed tension in the bound arms and trembling thighs. But Ray said nothing, total control given up to Bodie. He was bound and he would do whatever Bodie required, take whatever he was offered.

The hand resting lightly against his throat slipped down, tracing patterns on his abdomen and wide-spread thighs. Bodie's face was calm and concentrated above him, sweat droplets making his skin even more translucent, beautiful and dangerous, controlling. Doyle tried to flex his hips up, hoping to brush his aching cock against the smooth skin of Bodie's stomach. The pleasant sensation at his nipples stopped and both of his lover's strong hands pressed his hips down.

"No way, Sunshine. You take what I give you and that's all." One finger reached over lightly

to brush the tip of Ray's cock. "You'll stay still and open for me, won't you Ray? Open all night?"

"Yes," Ray whispered softly, voice turning to a choked off shout as his cock was taken deep into Bodie's throat. Sweet tension building, Doyle felt his balls tighten, fingers caressing, then abandoning them. If only Bodie would release the tension at the base of his cock. Distractedly, he felt fingers against his nipples, rubbing and pinching, sending even more stimulation coursing through his veins. He was about to come, he could feel it, was so glad of it, sucking warmth surrounding him. And then he felt the danger, teeth scraping along his length.

"Bodie!"

He was released, no real damage done other than the painful tingling that remained. The hands that had caressed his aching chest stilled.

"My choice, Ray. That's what you wanted."

As green eyes locked on his face, Bodie bent to place a gentle kiss on bruised lips, withdrawing slightly to brush his own against the smooth forehead. One hand moved up to the delicate throat, the other slipping down to brace itself against the bed.

Without warning, Bodie was back. Two thrusts ensheathed him, Ray arching up in painful pleasure beneath him, forcing him in to the hilt. But Ray couldn't move much, the hand on his throat combined with the cuffs to keep him restrained while Bodie torturously pleased them both.

"Love that... don't you?" he panted while he thrust slowly, deliberately, grazing as he did so the prostate deep within his lover's body. Each thrust was met with a gasp or a whimper from Doyle. He groaned, his back arching in frustration, courting the orgasm he was prevented by the bondage of his cock.

"Please," he begged, "let me come!" He strained against the cuffs in a futile attempt to free himself so that he could release his cock. He felt as if he couldn't endure this torture a moment longer, but the secure bonds ensured that he would have to.

"Bodie!" he moaned desperately. "Please... let me..."

Bodie was very close to the brink himself.

"Since you're begging so nicely....," with shaking hands, he quickly removed the lace around his lover's cock, grabbing the shaft firmly and pulling it in rhythm to his thrusts. And then it was just a matter of seconds. Uttering an animal half-cry Bodie filled his body with a warm, slick flood.

Doyle felt the climax shake his body like an elementary force, the cuffs and Bodie's thighs keeping his convulsing body restrained. His seed shot up to splash his chest in several aching bursts until he felt completely drained.

Out of breath, Bodie collapsed on top of his heavily panting partner. After a moment of recollection he fumbled for the keys and opened the cuffs as fast as he could to pull Doyle into his arms. Bonelessly, Doyle let himself be arranged in Bodie's embrace while he slowly swam back to reality.

"You're beautiful, sunshine," Bodie whispered into his curls. He swallowed. "I love you!"

"Love you, too! Christ, what you did to me..." Bodie grinned. "Like my technique, eh?"

"Where'd you learn that?"

"S' natural, that," Bodie bragged happily and added softly "...you're easy to read, mate. Easy to see what gets you going... I like making you lose control. Makes me feel powerful."

"Fancy trying it yourself sometime?"

"Not sure I'd like it the way you do. Might hit too close to home... bad memories—But if you'd really like to, we could try it some time."

The End

CI-5

